

# Ideology on Markesot Series Cover by Emha Ainun Nadjib: A Semiotic Study

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**Abstract.** This study aims to reveal and describe the symbols used by Javanese culturalists to communicate Javanese philosophy to a pluralistic modern society. The method used is a descriptive qualitative approach using Barthes semiotic method to understanding its meanings. The results of this study indicate that there are messages and ideologies that Emha Ainun Nadjib is trying to convey through his work. Emha tries to describe modern Javanese philosophy through the use of attributes attached to Punakawan figures. This study aims to reveal and describe the symbols used by Javanese culturalists to communicate Javanese philosophy to a pluralistic modern society. The method used is a descriptive qualitative approach using the Barthes semiotic method to understand its meaning. The results of this study indicate that there are messages and ideologies that Emha Ainun Nadjib is trying to convey through his work. Emha tries to describe modern Javanese philosophy through the use of attributes attached to the Punakawan character. So it can be concluded that through the fictional character Markesot, Emha is actually conveying his ideology and views on the current state of the nation. This research is expected to be a reference for how an ideology can be conveyed in a language that is not necessarily explicit, but still pays attention to the local culture aspects.

## 1. Introduction

In communicating, humans use certain visual symbols that have a purpose and meaning. People produce messages and translate them into visual language which is then disseminated. This phenomenon is certainly a manifestation of the diversity of languages used in daily communication. But in reality, in the aspect of visual symbol intent, not all messages can be perfectly captured by communication partners. Communication will be well established without distortion, if both parties have the same experience regarding the visuals used, so that the same interpretation will appear. Kurniawan and Irma [1] found a distortion in advertising communication when the audience did not have the same experience and culture as the producer.

Emha Ainun Nadjib or who is usually called Cak Nun, a Javanese-born culturalist, tries to establish communication between himself and the wider audience. Through the cover design of the book series, entitled Markesot Bertutur, Markesot Bertutur Lagi, Slilit Sang Kiyai, and Surat Kepada Kanjeng Nabi, see figure 1, Cak Nun tries to present language in a visual form to describe the ideas and thoughts contained in the book. As Rustan said that book covers usually get special handling apart from the portion the greatest emphasis, a cover designed to entice people to buy a book [2]. What is

interesting to be studied further is that in the cover, the author tries to display visual symbols that at first glance seem to be one. In fact, if examined more deeply, if the visual cover is separated from its elements, it will be found visual signs that represent culture and religion. The visual combines Punakawan signs which are identical to Javanese culture, with other signs and symbols identical to Islam, even with the mixing of Malay culture with modern culture.



**Figure 1.** Markesot Series Book Cover.

Many previous studies have studied using Semiotic as an analytical tool and lifting the cover of the book as the object. However, upon closer inspection, most of the objects studied in Indonesia are communication media that are devoted to the economy and a relatively narrow age group and are categorized as fiction novels. Like Fadzilah, Untari, & Purnomo research [3] which analyzed the cover on Andersen's Thumbelina fiction novel adaptation who has a youth segmentation. Using Pierce's semiotics, they identified differences on visual adaptation on movie and novel. This study is also limited to infer general meanings associated with the symbols contained on the cover, such as, the plot of the story, characterization and sign or symbol presented, and how moral value delivered to the audience. The same thing was also done by Simbolon, Ambarita, & Hadi [4] when identifying visual icons in Hirata's novel *Cinta Dalam Gelas*. The next research that was found was the research of Hafiar et al [5] on Semiotic Analysis on the Cover of the Trilogy Novel by Safitri. The results of the study concluded that the meaning that was successfully constructed by the illustrations on the cover of the book was a picture of a romantic story that presented a character who had an elegant and classy character. In accordance with the symbol representation that visually displays the Eiffel Tower and the state of the gardens in France. So that the backgrounds of the targeted readers are people with upper middle social status. This research is different from the research that will be carried out in this proposal. These differences include that the object of research is not a novel, and has a wider market share that targets Javanese, Muslim, or general readers from various economic circles. Those are differentiator from the proposed research, because the object in this research is not a fiction novel, but a humanist point of view in seeing the mixing of cultural and religious values that actually occurs.

Another differentiator is that the proposed research has a deeper purpose. It not only identifying visual symbols, explains the relationship between visual signs, and the content of the book, but also reveals the artist's point of view about the factual conditions of culture and people's belief systems. As Pezzini [6] said Barthes semiology could serve the purpose of exposing precisely the ideological mechanisms at work in a consumer society.

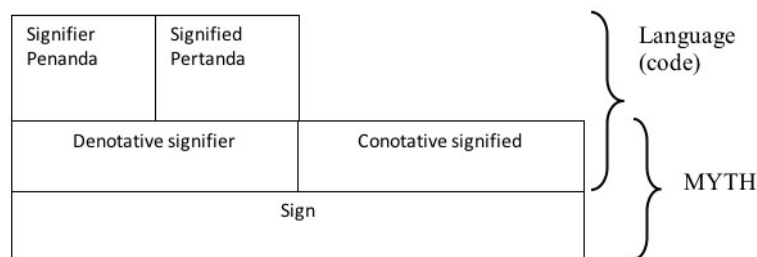
Research that has an object with a wider and factual market share was carried out by Marhendra [7] when analyzing Pramita's illustration on Tempo Magazine Media, and Fadli and Islam's research [8] when analyzing the cover of Tempo Magazine Edition "Bancakan Jatah BUMN". Both studies reveal that the signs in the visual cover are discussed based on their meaning and function of use. Tempo Magazine cover requires that the visuals will only be understood by certain people. People who do follow the development of political cases that contain corruption. Another studies that reveals ideology has been carried out by Varughese [9] who studies how visual representations of deities in the genre of mythology-inspired fiction made. How such new modes of portraying deities talk to (and of) visuality and Indianness within the post-millennial Indian moment.

Research on book covers as an effort to reveal ideology is considered relevant to do. The researcher saw what was done by Liffen [10] who succeeded in revealing the model of women's empowerment in the cover of the romance novel of Women Workers Catching Herring in Scotland. Ghandeharion & Mousavi-Takiyeh [11] challenges the old adage that the cover is meant to be a material for assessing the content of a book when conducting a religious-cultural study in cover literature on the Iran war. Meanwhile Mossop [12] also revealed the criteria for deciding whether the cover should be seen as an intersemiotic translation. Based on those researches, the researcher believes that this method is appropriate for revealing the ideology behind visible visual signs. The thing that distinguishes the proposed research is the method used. The two methods certainly have significant differences, Pierce's semiology is different from Saussure's semiology which was refined by Barthes to the third level in terms of meaning, Nöth [13].

This study aims to reveal the meaning of the visual signs used, using semiotic study. Separate the existing visual signs, and then examine their related meaning to the third level. Hopefully this study can provide knowledge about the sign structure used by a humanist in performing a 'mix' between cultural and religious symbols visually and accepted by the wider community. So that it can enrich studies and thoughts related to language and visual culture in Indonesia.

## 2. Methods

This study uses Barthes Semiotic theory as qualitative methods. Many qualitative studies use semiotics as an analytical tool. But in reality the development of culture and the dynamics of society demands novelty from research that uses semiotic analysis. Berger [14] revealed that Semiotics is a science that studies the existence of signs that involve codes in their understanding. Semiotics is imperialistic, which can be applied in many areas of life, including design and culture. Therefore, this theory is considered appropriate to be used in this study. As a follower of Saussure's semiological view, Barthes argues that the relationship between the signifier and the sign is arbitrary in the sense that it is not formed naturally. There are factors that affect the meaning of symbols seen other than those seen by the senses. This Barthes idea perfects Saussure's semiology which initially focused on signification at the denotative level. Barthes even adds to the development of the meaning of signs to the connotative level, namely the third level, see Fig. 2. In addition, Barthes also sees another aspect of marking, the "myth" which marks an ideology, belief, political system, and culture that exists in a society.



**Figure 2.** Barthes Semiotic Level.

The meaning of language and signs in communication continues to shift along with people's experiences and understandings in cultural movements. For example, the color blue in food was once considered “cold” and “salty” by society, but cultural trends have distorted and even changed that perception. Now the color blue in food is perceived as “new”, “young”, and “fashionable”. Just like the paint color on four-wheeled vehicles, in the early 90s, white became one of the colors that car buyers avoided. Many car enthusiasts prefer black as a color that reflects stability and luxury. But once again, a shift in perception occurred again around 2005. Where the white color became the new idol in the automotive industry, especially cars.

### 3. Results And Discussion

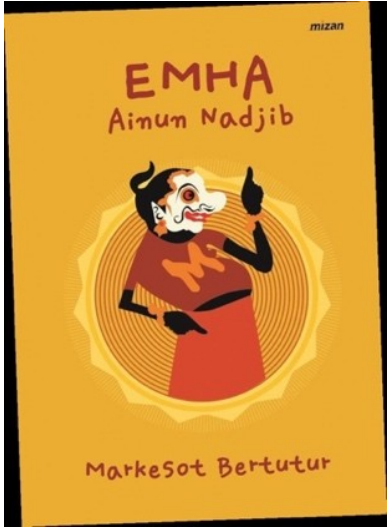
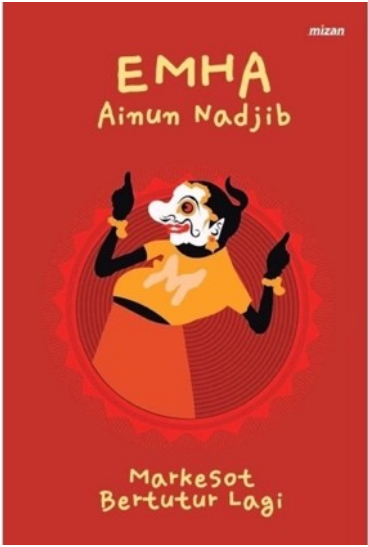
Based on Barthes' Semiotics, the four covers of the book have 2 signs that can be studied. The signifier is a visual that has a denotative meaning and a sign that has a connotative meaning. The visual cover displays the Javanese visual repertoire in the form of the Punakawan wayang characters. Wearing a modified costume that is contemporary, usually appear in the daily life of Javanese people.

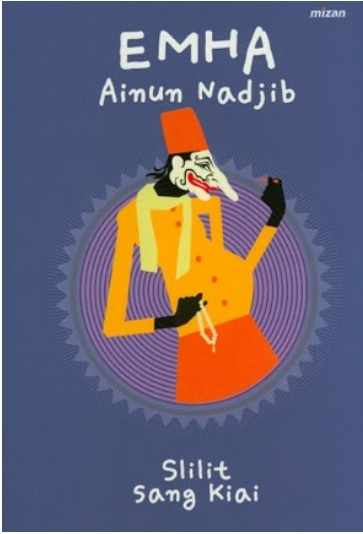
#### 3.1. Visual Signs

Visual signs that barely seen and separated by outline elements consist of foreground, background, and elements. Here at the Table. 1 is a sequence of visual tags that also represents the cover of the Markesot Series book. Markesot Series.

**Table. 1** Visual of Markesot Series Book Cover

NO	Visual	Signifier
1		<b>Markesot Bertutur</b> First book series of Markesot.

	 <p>Markesot Bertutur Book Cover</p>	<p>Foreground:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The smiling Punakawan Gareng face to right side.</li> <li>- Left Gareng's hand raised 1 finger up and the other down.</li> <li>- Gareng's costume was modified by wearing a red sarong and a maroon T-shirt with the inscription M.</li> <li>- EMHA Ainun Nadjib's; large sized maroon-colored manuscript which is the author's name.</li> <li>- Markesot Bertutur text in small size and maroon-colored which is the title of the book.</li> </ul> <p>Background:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Yellow circles appears framed by a 15 peaks mandala.</li> <li>- Dominated by flat gold yellow color.</li> </ul>
2	 <p>Markesot Bertutur Lagi Book Cover</p>	<p><b>Markesot Bertutur Lagi</b> Second book series of Markesot</p> <p>Foreground:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The smiling Punakawan Gareng face to left side.</li> <li>- Both Gareng's hands raised 1 finger up.</li> <li>- Gareng's costume was modified by wearing a red sarong and an orange T-shirt with the inscription M.</li> <li>- EMHA Ainun Nadjib's; large sized gold yellow-colored manuscript which is the author's name.</li> <li>- Markesot Bertutur Lagi text in small size and maroon-colored which is the title of the book.</li> </ul> <p>Background:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bright red circles appears framed by a 25 peaks mandala.</li> <li>- Dominated by flat maroon color.</li> </ul>
3	<p><b>Silit Sang Kiai</b> Third book series of Markesot</p>	

	 <p>Slilit Sang Kiai Book Cover</p>	<p>Foreground:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The smiling Punakawan Petruk face to left side.</li> <li>- Left Petruk's hands hold a red pen and the right one hold a tasbih.</li> <li>- Petruk's costume was modified by wearing a red sarong and a orange long sleeve shirt, veil on his neck, and red colored turkish style head cover.</li> <li>- EMHA Ainun Nadjib's; large sized grey-colored manuscript which is the author's name.</li> <li>- Slilit Sang Kiai text in small size and grey-colored which is the title of the book.</li> </ul> <p>Background:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Purple circles appears framed by a 46 peaks mandala.</li> <li>- Dominated by flat dark blue color.</li> </ul>
4	 <p>Surat Kepada Kanjeng Nabi Book Cover</p>	<p><b>Surat Kepada Kanjeng Nabi</b> Fourth book series of Markesot</p> <p>Foreground:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The siluet of wayang handed a large brown mail envelope with 2 hands, which has glowing white circle on it.</li> <li>- EMHA Ainun Nadjib's; large sized light yellow-colored text which is the author's name.</li> <li>- Surat Kepada Kanjeng Nabi text in small size and grey-colored which is the title of the book.</li> </ul> <p>Background:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cream circles appears framed by a 36 peaks mandala.</li> <li>- Dominated by flat dark leave green color.</li> </ul>

Those visual signs denotatively try to explain the outline of the book title. Writing the title and author of the book can be read clearly by the reader. While the visual wayang strengthens the perception of the persona that describes the main character in the book.

### 3.2. Connotative Meaning

Connotatively, the visuals of the Gareng and Petruk puppets that appear on the cover of the book explain the point of view of the Markesot and Sang Kiai characters. Gareng in Punakawan is described as Semar's first child [15]. Initially, he was the figure who fought with Petruk until he suffered fractures in his hands and feet. Petruk is Gareng's adopted sister, adopted by Semar as the second child. Petruk has a long nose, and is known as a figure with a face that is not handsome. Petruk is generous and likes to share knowledge. His life experiences varied, from being a commoner to becoming a king, so his knowledge was extensive. While Gareng has a simple nature, does not want wealth and the throne. He also has a wise character and is always careful in his actions. The visual of Gareng wearing a t-shirt with the letter M written on it is a depiction of the Markesot figure who is identical to Gareng's character. T-shirts as character identities are very commonly used in Indonesia, so it is appropriate to do so, see Figure 3. The depiction of Kiai's figure visualized by Petruk who wears a sarong, prayer beads, long-sleeved shirt, and a Turkish-style cap.



**Figure 3.** Ipin Upin Use Character Initial Name on Costume adopted from Sobri [16]

The next costume visual is the sarong that appears in all three Markesot books. Sarong in Indonesian culture is clothing that is used in both formal and informal settings. The sarong is closely related to the culture of the santri, especially in the Java area. Almost all Islamic boarding schools in Java require a sarong as clothing for their students. The thing that distinguishes the value of the sarong is the motif and material. In Indonesian society, the use of sarongs on formal occasions is more important for the tribes on the island of Sumatra, not Java. So that at the connotative level, the visual of the sarong on the cover can be interpreted as a picture of Islam and modesty, see Figure 4. Because the visual displayed is a sarong without a motif worn by a Javanese wayang character. Further visual signs of Islamic clerik can be found in the attributes worn by the figure of Petruk, in the form of a Turkish-style head covering, prayer beads, and scarves that are worn around the neck and shoulders.



**Figure 4.** Sarong and Santri's Daily Life adopted from Zamzami [17]

Another visual sign is on the cover of the fourth series, which only depicts the silhouette of an arm holding a letter envelope. On this cover, the reader is not presented with explicit visual language, but also with signs that imply to whom the letter was delivered. Surat Kepada Kanjeng Nabi, in this case Prophet Muhammad PBUH is the person to whom it is addressed. Visualized with white circles implying light. This is in accordance with Islamic teachings which do not allow visualization of the face of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH.

### 3.3. Myth Level

At the mythical level, the four covers convey a message to the reader. The message can be seen in the selection of Markesot, Kiai, and letter carrier characters. The figure of Gareng who was chosen as the representative of Markesot, provides a strong relationship with the figure of Kiai who is visualized as the figure of Petruk. Markesot as an older brother and Kyai as a younger brother certainly shows views about the position of Islamic clerks and students. The figure of Markesot is still unclear whether it is fiction, real, or a manifestation of the author's thoughts. However, there are clues when Cak Nun wrote this character, one of which is an attempt to portray the figure of an ordinary person, but has a unique mind, seeks the truth, and tries to survive the progress of the times by trying hard. To defend their Islamic beliefs [18]. So that in the relationship described in the 4 book series, it can be seen that Markesot is a thought that tries to find the truth through its own way. He does not necessarily follow the existing 'ulama figures', but considers them as a reference for the perpetrators of life. Markesot is a representation of modern Javanese Muslim questions about the conditions of the times. Traditional religious values that began to shift became the main idea of the author, Emha Ainun Nadjib.

Meanwhile, the figure of Kyai who is described as Petruk, is represented as a person who is more experienced, has more social standing, and has his own path. The value also seems to be trying to be displayed through the existing visual background, in the form of mandalas with different levels of complexity. The highest level of complexity is found in the background of the cover of *Slilit Sang Kiai*. Apart from the main idea of the book's contents, the visual cover clearly gives more value to Petruk, in accordance with the existing wayang stories.

As for the fourth series, the author of the book only shows the silhouette of the arm which gives the meaning of mystery about who gave the letter to Kanjeng Nabi. But the position of the Prophet's arm and light clearly shows a real positional relationship. That the position of the Prophet is above the messenger. The Prophet is still seen as a source of answers to every problem that exists, even though the times continue to develop and at this time the Prophet physically no longer exists.

## 4. Conclusion

Emha Ainun Najib presents a fictional figure as a manifestation of his thoughts about his confusion in dealing with cultural progress. When he became a Muslim who also adhered to Javanese philosophy, he also faced the cultural influences of globalization. Cak Nun describes it in its entirety with the



presence of wayang kulit visuals that represent Javanese culture, Islamic attributes that represent their faith, and casual attributes that represent the progress of the times. Cak Nun also identified his position as a persona who did not want to follow the flow of change. Both those adopted by the majority of the Islamic pact and globalization itself. He prefers the conditions in front of his eyes as a reference for life. By still positioning the Prophet Muhammad as the only reference that will give the best answer. Interestingly, these visual signs are accepted by Indonesian people which has many cultural diversity, even in Indonesian Moslem itself. And also the visual do not cause controversy among the public. Even though these values are quite sensitive values when juxtaposed together, related to Islamic discourse, Indonesian culture, and modern culture. Like on the cover which depicts a combination of t-shirts, sarongs, and prayer beads, for example. Markesot's role as the main image is positioned as the subject, the main character who gives advice is considered to be accustomed to using a combination of these various attributes. However, the public's response will be different if they come across a visual of an Islamic clerk who in his daily life looks like that, or appears on television.

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