

## **"Representation of the Political Condition of Java in the 20th Century: An Analysis of Serat Wicara Keras"**

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### **Abstract**

Serat Wicara Keras is one of the most renowned literary works, as it contains various lessons, including history, social values, culture, politics, religion, and philosophy. This manuscript was later reproduced in the 20th century by Yasadipura III, also known as R. Ng. Sastrawikrama, as a depiction of social criticism and the author's anger toward the ruling leaders or government. However, an important question arises regarding the reason behind the writing of this manuscript. What political conditions served as the main trigger for the creation of Serat Wicara Keras. What images and portrayals emerged from its composition. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with a literary hermeneutic approach, further supported by Shoshana Felman's Testimony theory, to interpret the events depicted in Yasadipura II's 1820 work Serat Wicara Keras. The analysis reveals political influences spanning from the aftermath of the Java War to the independence of Indonesia, which shaped the political landscape of Java. It also highlights the role of post-independence Indonesian activists in safeguarding national sovereignty amid various internal conflicts, extending into the Reform Era. This represents how the political climate in Indonesia evolved and the extent to which the content of Serat Wicara Keras reflected the realities of its time.

**Keywords:** Serat Wicara Keras, Politics, Representation, Java.

## **INTRODUCTION**

From an etymological perspective, the term *sastra* (literature) is derived from Sanskrit. The root *sas-* means "to instruct, educate, or guide," while the suffix *-tra* denotes an "instrument" or "tool." Therefore, *sastra* fundamentally represents an "instrument of education," which is further understood as a text or work that serves to provide guidance, instruction, and moral teaching (Teeuw, 2015). Literature embodies a form of human creativity manifested through language. Generally, literature is perceived as an imaginative work containing aesthetic values but also rich in philosophical and moral significance.

Literature is not merely a collection of beautifully arranged words; it is a representation of human experience encompassing emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. Thus, literature serves not only aesthetic purposes but also educational, moral, and social functions. Through literary works, readers are invited to reflect upon reality, discover wisdom, and understand the dynamic complexities of society (Damono, 2012).

In Indonesian cultural heritage, literature appears in various forms and media. Oral literature is transmitted across generations through folktales, myths, legends, and traditional poetry. Written literature, on the other hand, is preserved in ancient manuscripts, poems, chronicles, and modern novels. Ultimately, literature reflects the intellectual history of the nation—its works serve not only as entertainment but also as mirrors of values, norms, and worldviews of the society in their historical context.

One of the most important forms of traditional Javanese literary works is the *serat*. The term *serat* literally means “writing” or “manuscript” in Javanese. It commonly takes the form of traditional poetry (*macapat*) or prose containing moral teachings, philosophy, ethics, and historical accounts. The *serat* functioned as a primary medium of knowledge transmission and education, particularly within the Javanese royal courts, which upheld a strong literacy tradition (Zoetmulder, 1983).

The *serat* often contains moral lessons and philosophical reflections passed down by kings, nobles, or scholars. Examples include *Serat Wulangreh* by Pakubuwana IV, which emphasizes ethics, discipline, and proper conduct; *Serat Centhini*, an encyclopedic work regarded as the “library of Javanese life” encompassing religion, culture, philosophy, and daily practices; and *Serat Wedhatama* by Mangkunegara IV, a text renowned for its spiritual teachings and moral guidance. Another significant work is *Serat Wicara Keras* by R.T. Sastranegara, which presents a form of social criticism toward the political and moral conditions of its time.

Traditional Javanese literature plays a vital role in preserving cultural values, ethics, and philosophical worldviews. The *serat*, as a genre, serves as a moral and social

educational medium. *Serat Wicara Keras* by Raden Tumenggung (R.T.) Sastranegara exemplifies how Javanese literature acts as a reflective mirror of life. In the broader corpus of Javanese literature, works like this are not only aesthetically significant but also function as instruments of education and as reflections of the sociopolitical realities of their era (Zoetmulder, 1983).

Etymologically, the term *wicara keras* can be understood as “firm speech” or “bold words.” The title aptly reflects the content of the text, which emphasizes firmness, courage, and honesty. This work is composed in *macapat*, a traditional Javanese poetic form characterized by fixed rules concerning the number of lines (*guru gatra*), syllables (*guru wilangan*), and rhyme patterns (*guru lagu*). Through this form, R.T. Sastranegara demonstrates his adherence to classical literary tradition while skillfully utilizing the beauty of language to convey moral teachings (Darusuprpta, 1984).

The content of *Serat Wicara Keras* focuses on moral teachings about honesty, courage, and integrity. Sastranegara emphasizes that individuals must have the courage to speak the truth, even when such truth invites conflict or rejection. This moral stance aligns with the Javanese ethical worldview, which values harmony in speech while demanding moral bravery in action (Mulder, 2001). Thus, this *serat* can be interpreted as a text of character education that instills values of integrity and moral fortitude.

Beyond its moral dimension, *Serat Wicara Keras* also carries sociopolitical significance. It was written during a period when Javanese society faced colonial oppression, social transformation, and the onset of modernization. Within this context, the call for courage in speaking truth may be interpreted as subtle social critique against unjust power structures. Through this, Sastranegara reveals that the *serat* was not merely a literary artifact but also a medium of communication that articulated the aspirations and resistance of the Javanese people (Pigeaud, 1967).

Representation is a central concept in the study of social sciences, culture, and communication. Generally, representation refers to the process of re-presenting reality, ideas, or identities through signs, symbols, or language. Representation is not a mere

reflection of reality but a construction of meaning shaped by social and cultural practices. When something is represented, it no longer appears as pure reality but as an interpretation influenced by values, ideologies, and interests (Hall, 1997).

In a cultural context, representation serves as a means to understand how a community perceives and depicts itself and others. It operates through systems of signs—language, imagery, and symbols—interpreted within specific social contexts. Therefore, representation is never neutral; it is always bound to relations of power. This can be seen, for instance, in how mass media represent issues of politics, gender, or religion, often reproducing dominant perspectives (Barker, 2004).

Furthermore, representation can be understood as a discursive process. It is part of the discourse that shapes knowledge and truth within society. What is accepted as truth or reality is essentially the result of representational constructions continuously produced and reproduced through language and social practices (Foucault, 1972). Thus, representation plays a crucial role in shaping a society's worldview and collective consciousness.

In the realm of art and literature, representation is used to explain how artistic or literary works construct particular images of humanity, nature, or social reality. A novel, for example, represents a certain society not as an objective fact but through the author's interpretation and perspective. This indicates that representation involves not only depiction but also the subjective and contextual construction of meaning (Ratna, 2010).

From a historical perspective, the relationship between Islam and politics in Indonesia reveals a dynamic interplay that is not always harmonious. These two entities, though distinct, remain closely interconnected and inseparable from the flow of historical development. The existence of Islam in Indonesia is determined by the intellectual and political capacities of its adherents. Social change and modernization often bring challenges to political institutions, sometimes even leading to regression. These conditions have triggered the reconstruction of political discourse and practice,

influencing both doctrinal and contextual understandings of religion in line with the nation's sociocultural evolution (Qisthi et al., 2022).

*Serat Wicara Keras* by Yasadipura II can be viewed as a reflection of the political dynamics of 19th-century Java. The text's moral counsel and subtle criticism of aristocrats and court officials depict a political landscape marked by a leadership crisis. Criticism toward self-serving officials symbolizes the weakening authority of kings due to internal conflicts among court elites. The unease expressed in the text regarding the court's dependency on external powers reflects the colonial influence over Javanese kingdoms. In this context, *Serat Wicara Keras* functions as a medium highlighting political dependency that undermined royal autonomy. The text also serves as a moral-political document, where advice on honesty, responsibility, and courageous leadership can be interpreted as veiled criticism of corrupt or self-interested feudal officials (Susanto et al., 2022).

The warnings against betrayal and division mirror the real political situation of 19th-century Java, characterized by internal conflicts and uprisings such as the Diponegoro War (1825–1830). Moreover, *Serat Wicara Keras* symbolically represents the ideal ruler as a moral and spiritual leader. By emphasizing patience, wisdom, and steadfast faith, the text attempts to restore the waning legitimacy of kingship under colonial domination. Hence, the *serat* functions not only as a literary text but also as a socio-political document expressing anxiety, critique, and hope for the restoration of Javanese leadership under colonial pressure.

*Serat Wicara Keras* by H. Tabbri represents both a personal reflection and a form of social critique against power practices during the colonial period. Through historical symbols such as the rivalry between Surakarta and Yogyakarta the text underscores the transience of worldly power and the importance of patience and spiritual acceptance. Simultaneously, its teachings criticize authoritarian rulers allied with colonial authorities who used slander and propaganda to weaken intellectuals and divide the people. Therefore, this text functions as a form of cultural resistance, asserting that true power lies in justice, not oppression (Sudrajat, 2014).

*Serat Wicara Keras* remains relevant in contemporary times, as its messages resonate with ongoing political and moral conditions in the 20th century and beyond. The human characteristics portrayed in the text continue to reflect the social realities and ethical challenges of modern society.

## LITERARY REVIEWS

A study discussing *Serat Wicara Keras* was conducted by Ahmad Sudrajat in his article titled “*Kajian Semiotika Penggalan Serat Wicara Keras dalam Naskah H. Tabbri*,” published in *Jumantara*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2014. This research employed a semiotic approach, particularly Michael Riffaterre’s theory, to reveal both the explicit and implicit meanings in the excerpts of *Serat Wicara Keras* found in the H. Tabbri manuscript. The study focused on the linguistic elements and poetic symbols used by Yasadipura II, as well as on how these textual features reflect criticism toward the leadership of Pakubuwana IV, who was perceived as authoritarian and aligned with Dutch colonial interests (Sudrajat, 2014). Meanwhile, the present study places greater emphasis on the historical dimension and political representation. While Sudrajat’s research analyzed *Serat Wicara Keras* through a textual-semiotic approach, this study seeks to interpret the work as a reflection of the political condition of Java in the 20th century. Rather than limiting the analysis to semiotic meanings, this study connects the text to its socio-historical realities and to the intellectual journey of Yasadipura II as its author. Thus, this research complements Sudrajat’s work by providing a historical perspective that highlights *Serat Wicara Keras* as both a cultural document and a political reflection within the dynamics of Javanese power.

Another study examining *Serat Wicara Keras* was conducted by Aloysius Indratmo, Wakti Abdullah Rais, Susanto, and Dwi Susanto in their article titled “*Serat Wicara Keras and the Hegemony of Javanese Priyayi*.” This research applied literary criticism and cultural studies approaches to explore how *Serat Wicara Keras* reflects the hegemony of the Javanese priyayi (noble class). The study focused on power relations manifested through the text, particularly in its portrayal of the priyayi as the socio-political elite mediating between royal and colonial authority. Consequently, this study demonstrates that *Serat Wicara Keras* is not merely a literary work but also an ideological



text that both reproduces and critiques priyayi hegemony within Javanese society. In contrast, the present research focuses on the historical dimension and political representation within *Serat Wicara Keras*. While Indratmo et al. emphasized the cultural and class-based analysis of priyayi hegemony, this study reads the text as a representation of Javanese political conditions in the 20th century. Beyond hegemony, it investigates the socio-historical context and Yasadipura II's intellectual trajectory as the author. Accordingly, this study expands upon the work of Indratmo et al. by offering a broader historical perspective that situates *Serat Wicara Keras* as both a mirror of political dynamics and a cultural document voicing criticism of power practices in its era (Susanto et al., 2022).

Another relevant study on Javanese literature is a thesis titled "*Representation of Surakarta Society in Serat Jayengbaya by Raden Ngabehi Ranggawarsita (1822–1873)*," written by Rizky Suwarno at UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta in 2024. This research focuses on how *Serat Jayengbaya* represents the social life of Surakarta's society during Ranggawarsita's time, particularly concerning the social, cultural, and societal dynamics of 19th-century Java. Using a historical-literary approach, the study examines *Serat Jayengbaya* not merely as an aesthetic product but also as a social mirror that records the experiences and conditions of its time. Meanwhile, the present study emphasizes the historical and political dimensions in *Serat Wicara Keras*. While Suwarno's thesis focuses on the social representation of 19th-century Surakarta society, this research directs its analysis toward the representation of Javanese political conditions in the 20th century. Therefore, this study not only explores social aspects but also connects the text with historical realities and Yasadipura II's intellectual journey as the author of *Serat Wicara Keras*. This positioning allows the study to complement Suwarno's work by highlighting *Serat Wicara Keras* as a cultural document and political reflection within the dynamics of Javanese power (Suwarno, 2024).

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with a literature review design. The qualitative approach is chosen because literary research primarily aims to interpret texts, symbols, and the representations of meaning embedded within a work. Qualitative

research produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words, which are interpreted in depth to understand a particular phenomenon. Accordingly, this study seeks to explore the meanings present in *Serat Wicara Keras* as a product of cultural and social expression (Moleong, 2017).

The data collection technique was conducted through library research by examining *Serat Wicara Keras* as the primary source, and reviewing other scholarly works such as books, articles, and previous studies as secondary sources. The literature review method enables the researcher to construct a comprehensive analysis by comparing various academic perspectives and linking them to the socio-historical context surrounding the text (Zed, 2004). For data analysis, this study adopts a literary hermeneutic approach. Hermeneutics is an interpretative method that emphasizes the dialogical relationship between text, context, and interpreter. In literary studies, hermeneutics serves to uncover meanings behind linguistic structures, symbols, and moral teachings contained in a text, while also interpreting their relation to the socio-political conditions of society (Ratna, 2010).

The hermeneutic analysis in this study is further reinforced by Shoshana Felman's theory of Testimony. This theory posits that texts can be viewed as forms of testimony to historical experience, trauma, and collective suffering. Within this framework, *Serat Wicara Keras* is not merely understood as a literary work containing moral teachings but also as a "voice of testimony" reflecting the socio-political condition of 20th-century Java particularly the suffering of the people under colonial systems and feudal practices. This perspective allows for the interpretation that the *pupuh*s (verses) within the text serve as veiled forms of social critique and as a medium for articulating collective experience through symbolic language (Sudrajat, 2022).

By integrating literary hermeneutics and Testimony theory, this study seeks to reveal the text's dimension as both a space for articulating social criticism and a historical testimony. Through this combined approach, the meanings embedded in *Serat Wicara Keras* can be understood more profoundly not only as an aesthetic literary product but also as a medium representing the collective experience of Javanese society under colonial power.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Political Conditions and Representations, 1901–1945

In 1901, the Dutch government officially implemented the Ethical Policy (Politik Etis) based on the Trias Van Deventer principles: irrigation, emigration, and education. Beyond its proclaimed purpose of “reciprocity,” the policy expanded educational access for the native population, giving rise to a new educated class that became the vanguard of modern nationalist movements such as Budi Utomo and Sarekat Islam. This educational dynamic, well-documented in the historiography of Indonesian education, contributed significantly to the growth of early political consciousness in the 20th century (Patoni, 2019).

However, this educational progress unfolded alongside colonial repression in the public sphere. Press regulations from the Drukpersreglement of 1856 to the Persbreidel Ordonantie of 1931 restricted anti-colonial discourse and targeted indigenous media. Historical studies of the colonial press reveal patterns of preventive and repressive censorship that curtailed political expression. Consequently, social criticism often turned to culture and literature as “safe” channels for dissent (Pradana, 2024).

During the Japanese occupation (1942–1945), political life was dramatically reshaped by direct control, propaganda, forced labor (*romusha*), and wartime economic mobilization, which caused widespread social and economic suffering. Yet, Japanese policies in political indoctrination and paramilitary training also fostered discipline and networking among native cadres skills that later proved vital during the transition to independence (Rosmaida Sinaga et al., 2024).

When viewed across the 1901–1945 horizon, the moral-political values expressed in *Serat Wicara Keras* such as condemnation of unjust rulers and compassion for the common people reflect a moral agenda resonant with the nationalist movement’s aspirations: social justice, leadership integrity, and protection of the oppressed. From a hermeneutic perspective, these teachings function as ethical codes that critique colonial and feudal authority while shaping the postcolonial imagination of moral governance (Susanto et al., 2022).

Ultimately, across the period from the Ethical Policy to the Japanese occupation, *Serat Wicara Keras* can be read as a consistent form of social critique: denouncing greed,

advocating compassion, and affirming moral leadership. Such an ethical narrative provided the symbolic capital for developing a political consciousness that sought not only regime change but a moral renewal of power itself (Patoni, 2019).

The discussion above is highly relevant to the following excerpts from *Serat Wicara Keras*:

**Gêdhe-gêdhening duraka wong sok agêgampang pati. Gêdhe-gêdhening ganjaran, wong mati kinarya urip. Ngapura ing wong sisip, tur sabar sarta rahayu. Nanging ta pangkat-pangkat yèn wus katrap kudu nuli pinanjingna ing kisas aywa was-uwas.**

Translation into English:

The greatest form of evil lies in those who take the act of killing lightly. The greatest reward, however, belongs to those who give life to the dead. Forgiving those who have erred, showing patience, and maintaining virtuous conduct are noble traits. Nevertheless, justice must be carefully discerned; once a punishment has been decreed, it should be carried out promptly and decisively, without hesitation in enforcing rightful retribution.

**Miwah kinarya wèwèh wong miskin, iku dadi pancadan kamulyan. Nora siya ing badane, watêking donya iku. Lan wong wadon pinêtri-pêtri, ngimêl marang kianat, nêkakakên mungsuh. Bisa agawe rêkasa, dhêdhêmêne lumuh suka kudu olih, iku wong karêm donya.**

Translation into English:

Likewise, using one's wealth to aid the poor serves as a staircase leading toward virtue and dignity. Such an attitude is never in vain, for it reflects the moral disposition of a person who manages wealth responsibly. In contrast, women who are pampered and inclined toward deceit bring forth enmity and unrest. Their behavior often brings hardship, as those consumed by greed are unwilling to give, yet insist on taking revealing the corrupt nature of materialistic desire.

**Lamun kawulane ana, sisip nuli dipun incih. Yèn marentah padha Jawa, kaya têbusan wong bali. Yèn uga dèn waoni, nuli malêthês mèt umur. Samya kèh datan ngeman, pêcating nyawa lan jisim. Pangrasane nora kêna ing duraka.**

Translation into English:

When a ruler's people exist under his governance, their wrongdoings must be swiftly corrected. When governing fellow Javanese, he should not treat them as captives or inferiors, as though they were prisoners of war from Bali. If the ruler resorts to oppression and unjust punishment in response to criticism, he merely shortens his own moral life. Many lament such actions, for at the moment when body and soul are separated, one's conscience will be weighed and the delusion of being untouched by wrongdoing will vanish.

The content of the *Serat* is highly relevant to the political conditions between 1901 and 1945, as this period was still under the dominion of colonialism and Japanese occupation. The people at that time suffered greatly, living in fear of exploitation and facing stark economic disparities, exemplified by the existence of Romusha. Society began to rejoice when Soekarno read the Proclamation Text, marking Indonesia's official independence from colonial and Japanese rule. The priyayi (Javanese aristocracy) who attained higher levels of education played a crucial role in the resistance, especially through media such as *Serat Wicara Keras*, which offered social criticism through literary works.

### **Political Conditions and Representations, 1946–1965**

The period between 1946 and 1965 marks one of the most dynamic and decisive phases in the history of modern Indonesian politics. Following the Proclamation of Independence on August 17, 1945, Indonesia faced two major challenges: defending its sovereignty against Dutch military aggression and establishing a stable and representative system of governance. During this formative period, Indonesia's political system underwent a profound transformation—from a parliamentary (liberal) democracy to a more authoritarian Guided Democracy.

During the Parliamentary Democracy era (1949–1959), Indonesia adopted a multi-party system emphasizing representation through parliament. The 1955 general election symbolized the nation's democratic aspirations, marked by high political participation and a relatively competitive electoral process (Indrajat, 2021). However, this system proved ineffective due to frequent cabinet changes, weak inter-party cohesion, and the failure of the Constituent Assembly to formulate a new constitution. These

structural weaknesses provided an opening for President Sukarno to introduce a new political model known as *Guided Democracy*.

Through the Presidential Decree of July 5, 1959, Sukarno dissolved the Constituent Assembly and reinstated the 1945 Constitution, thereby shifting Indonesia's political orientation toward centralization. He formulated the ideological framework of *Nasakom* (Nationalism, Religion, and Communism) as the foundation of the state and integrated various political forces into a unified state-controlled structure. In practice, *Guided Democracy* transformed legislative institutions such as the DPR-GR (Provisional People's Representative Council) and MPRS (Provisional People's Consultative Assembly) into instruments for legitimizing executive decisions, while freedom of the press, political opposition, and institutional independence were systematically suppressed (Pratiwi, 2016; Sholehuddin, 2015).

One of the key mechanisms used to control political representation during this era was the state's ideological indoctrination through political education and propaganda. This was achieved through doctrines such as *Manipol-USDEK* an acronym for *Manifesto Politik*, the 1945 Constitution, Indonesian Socialism, Guided Democracy, Guided Economy, and Indonesian Identity and *TUBAPIN* (*Tujuh Bahan Pokok Indoktrinasi*, or the Seven Basic Materials of Indoctrination). These doctrines served as ideological and pedagogical tools designed to align the people's political consciousness with state ideology, rather than to cultivate a critical stance toward the government (Aulia Rahmi Putri, 2025).

Thus, examining the political transformation between 1946 and 1965 is essential to understanding how popular political representation in Indonesia evolved from an open, pluralistic system into a closed and centralized one. This study employs a historical-political approach supported by scholarly literature from academic journals to explore these dynamics in depth.

In discussing the political conditions between 1946 and 1955, it is evident that Indonesia was still in the process of experimenting with and defining its political system, attempting to reconcile ideological differences while striving for national unity and independence. In this context, *Serat Wicara Keras* reflects similar ideological struggles through its poetic discourse, offering insight into the moral and political anxieties of its

era.

**Malah mulya ing dêlahan, pinuji dadia gusti. Asih ing para ngulama, wêlas marang pêkir miskin, awêtà dèn aubi. Tumusa dadia Pakubuwana ing rat Jawa. Aywa mikir tèki-tèki, amikira tulus arjaning nagara.**

Translation into English:

Truly, glory is attained in the hereafter, where one is praised as a noble ruler. Such a leader is filled with affection for scholars, compassion for the poor, and steadfastness in providing protection and guidance. He becomes the center of harmony within the Javanese world, embodying moral and spiritual authority. Yet, he must not concern himself solely with ascetic practices; rather, he should devote his thoughts and efforts to ensuring the welfare and prosperity of the state

The political dynamics described in *Serat Wicara Keras* parallel the conditions experienced in Indonesia between 1946 and 1965, particularly during President Sukarno's efforts to stabilize the government by transitioning from a parliamentary (liberal) democracy to the more authoritarian system of Guided Democracy. Much like the monarchical model, political power during this era became highly centralized in the hands of a single leader exercised without institutional checks, public accountability, or participatory mechanisms. Leadership under such a system operated according to personal will, often disregarding legal and constitutional constraints.

Moreover, Sukarno's ideological doctrine known as *Nasakom* (Nationalism, Religion, and Communism) functioned as the state ideology intended to unify political parties and shape citizens' political consciousness in alignment with the state's official ideology. Rather than serving as a corrective force to the government, this doctrine became a mechanism for consolidating political control and suppressing dissent.

In addition, the early years of Indonesian independence were marked by a series of armed rebellions, most notably the *Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia* (DI/TII) movement. Emerging from discontent with what was perceived as a secular and overly conciliatory political direction, DI/TII sought to establish an Islamic state (*Negara Islam Indonesia*, NII). Led by Kartosoewirjo, the movement declared the establishment of the NII on August 7, 1949, in West Java. Over time, the rebellion expanded to regions such as Aceh, South Sulawesi, and South Kalimantan, posing a serious threat to national

integration until 1965.

The DI/TII movement aspired to build a state grounded in Islamic principles, rejecting *Pancasila* and the 1945 Constitution as the nation's ideological and legal foundations. Kartosoewirjo argued that the Indonesian government had deviated from Islamic values and had become overly submissive to Western systems. According to Miftahudin and Kusdiana (2023), DI/TII can also be understood as a response to frustrations following the Renville Agreement, which required Indonesian forces to withdraw from West Java creating a power vacuum that enabled Islamic armed groups to establish de facto control over certain territories.

As the nation approached 1965, language emerged as a powerful instrument of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence refers to the subtle yet coercive means through which power is exercised via language, symbols, and discourse causing individuals to internalize domination as natural or legitimate. During the era of Guided Democracy, symbolic violence became particularly visible across multiple domains.

One prominent example was the use of pejorative political labeling. Opposing groups were often branded as “enemies of the people,” “counter-revolutionaries,” or “traitors to the nation.” These labels were not mere rhetoric; they served as mechanisms to delegitimize opposition and exclude dissenting voices from legitimate political participation.

The manipulation of national symbols and ideological rituals also operated as a potent form of symbolic violence. State symbols, revolutionary songs, and political ceremonies were used to cultivate a singular national identity that demanded universal adherence. Those who refused or neglected to participate were labeled as threats to unity and revolution, thus facing social marginalization.

Mass media particularly state-controlled newspapers and radio played a crucial role in disseminating this dominant narrative. Through highly orchestrated propaganda, the media glorified certain groups as revolutionary heroes while framing others as foreign agents or traitors. This total control over public discourse effectively eliminated pluralism, leaving the populace exposed only to state-sanctioned perspectives.

President Sukarno's speeches exemplified the practice of *wicara keras* a form of assertive or forceful rhetoric that embodied symbolic violence in linguistic form. Through



impassioned and bombastic oratory, Sukarno declared that every citizen must remain loyal to the revolution and oppose all manifestations of imperialism and reactionary politics. In doing so, he positioned himself as the embodiment of the people's will, thereby framing any criticism of his leadership as an act of betrayal. Such rhetoric effectively closed the space for constructive dialogue and political critique.

The impact of symbolic violence during this period was profound. It entrenched ideological domination without the need for direct physical coercion, dividing society along ideological lines and rendering dissent as subversive behavior. This normalization of hostility toward opposing groups paved the way for the legitimization of state repression and physical violence in the aftermath of the 1965 events, as the public had already internalized state narratives that dehumanized political adversaries.

### **Political Conditions and Representations (1966–1998)**

At the onset of the *New Order* regime in 1966, state power was consolidated under the banner of stability and development. This consolidation was supported by the depoliticization of society through ideological indoctrination programs such as the *Pedoman Penghayatan dan Pengamalan Pancasila* (P4, Guidelines for the Comprehension and Implementation of Pancasila) and university policies such as *Normalisasi Kehidupan Kampus* (NKK, Campus Normalization) and *Badan Koordinasi Kemahasiswaan* (BKK, Student Coordination Board). These mechanisms effectively curtailed direct political participation while normalizing ideological conformity as a prerequisite for "economic modernization."

The P4 indoctrination program and the institutionalization of "national identity" across multiple channels schools, organizations, and bureaucracies created a hegemonic state discourse. Educational studies and textbook analyses demonstrate how *Pancasila* was positioned as the sole ideology and ultimate source of legitimacy, thereby suppressing interpretive plurality in favor of ideological uniformity (Agista, 2023).

In the information sector, the state regulated the public sphere through a licensing regime for the press (*SIUPP*), censorship, and publication bans often justified under the doctrine of "*Pers Pancasila*" (a "free but responsible" press). Historical and legal studies on media show a recurring pattern of control that marginalized critical journalism and normalized self-censorship among editors and journalists (Sariyatun, 2016). Similar

mechanisms operated in the cultural domain: depoliticization of entertainment media, the curation of official historical narratives, and the framing of “national culture” as an instrument of political legitimacy. Humanities research highlights how New Order cultural hegemony and the depoliticization of artistic and literary expressions functioned as strategies for maintaining social consensus (Safrina, 2002).

The discourse dimension of *Serat Wicara Keras* (SWK) particularly its contrast between *wicara bener* (truthful or ethical speech) and *wicara keras* (harsh or harmful speech) resonates with the problem of freedom of expression during the New Order period. Open criticism was often met with repression, prompting writers and intellectuals to adopt *wicara alus* (refined or allegorical speech) as a safer rhetorical strategy for articulating counter-discourses. This aligns with scholarly findings on the silencing and domestication of the press, as well as the prevalence of self-censorship under authoritarian rule (Eddyono, 2021).

Within this historical horizon (1966–1998), *Serat Wicara Keras* can thus be read as an *ethical archive* a moral framework for power that advocates justice for the people, rejects greed, and restrains symbolic violence. In this sense, SWK operates as a counter-narrative to the political and cultural hegemony of the New Order. Reading SWK alongside studies of media, culture, and the political economy of the period reveals that resistance in Indonesia did not occur solely in the streets or parliament, but also within the symbolic realm of textual discourse (Safrina, 2002).

In conclusion, the crisis of the late 1990s exposed the fragility of a legitimacy built on ideological hegemony when confronted with the accumulation of corruption, collusion, and nepotism (KKN), compounded by economic collapse. The downfall of the New Order regime ultimately confirmed what traditional *piwulang* (didactic literature) such as SWK had long warned: that without justice and integrity, any political order is destined to collapse under the weight of its own internal contradictions (Ujang Hermansyah, 2025).

**Aywa dumèh wong awirya, anak putune wong mukti. Sanadyan mêngku nagara, aywa sumakeyan êdir. Tan nganggo dugi-dugi, sapa sira sapa ingsun. Puniku bêbakalan, atêtombok kaki nini. Kang wus bêcik panggonane mèlu nyambat.**

Translation into English:

Do not let nobility make one's descendants live in abundance. Even when ruling a nation, one must not elevate oneself or act arrogantly. Never speak presumptuously asking, 'who are you, and who am I?' for such attitudes foretell misfortune for one's ancestors. Those accustomed to being a refuge for others will, in time, be the ones asked for help.

This representation is profoundly relevant to Indonesia's political reality following more than three decades of President Suharto's rule. After approximately 32 years in power, Suharto was eventually deposed by the people a culmination of widespread public discontent. This downfall was closely linked to the regime's systematic suppression of the media, which silenced dissenting voices and constrained critical discourse. During this period, numerous activists emerged as defenders of the people's rights, resisting the injustices perpetuated by the nation's authoritarian leadership. Their movements marked the reawakening of civic agency and signaled the erosion of the hegemonic order that had long been sustained through coercion, censorship, and the monopolization of truth.

### **Political Conditions and Representations, 1999–2000**

After the 1955 general election, Indonesia did not hold another election for sixteen years, until the end of President Sukarno's rule. The regime of Suharto, who replaced Sukarno in 1966, referred to the previous period as the *Old Order*. Under Suharto's leadership, elections were reintroduced in 1971, involving ten political parties. The five parties that gained the most votes were Golongan Karya (Golkar), Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Parmusi, the Indonesian National Party (PNI), and the Indonesian Islamic Union Party (PSII).

Under the New Order government, elections were regulated by Law No. 3 of 1975, which merged the existing political parties into only two formal political entities: the United Development Party (PPP) and the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI), alongside one functional group, Golongan Karya (Golkar). Throughout Suharto's regime, six elections were held, from 1971 to 1997, all of which were dominated by Golkar (Miaz, 2012).

A major transformation in Indonesia's political representation occurred during the

period of 1999–2000, marking the transition from the authoritarian New Order to a democratic multiparty system. This era was a crucial historical turning point characterized by the first relatively free and open general election and the establishment of a more representative legislative body. Following the collapse of the New Order, the first post-reform election was held on June 7, 1999, under President B. J. Habibie. This election was historically significant, with participation from forty-eight political parties an extraordinary contrast to the highly restricted elections of previous decades. The five leading parties in the 1999 election were the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), Golkar, the United Development Party (PPP), the National Awakening Party (PKB), and the National Mandate Party (PAN) (Romli, 2011).

The 1999 election was based on a new political and legal framework, comprising Law No. 2 of 1999 on Political Parties, Law No. 3 of 1999 on General Elections, and Law No. 4 of 1999 on the Structure and Status of the People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR), House of Representatives (DPR), and Regional Representatives (Jovano Deivid Oleyver Palenewen & Murniyati Yanur, 2022). These laws not only served as legal foundations but also ignited intense debates among political parties and stakeholders concerning the most suitable electoral system for Indonesia whether plurality/majority, proportional, or mixed systems.

In formulating the new electoral framework, the “Team of Seven” (*Tim Tujuh*), established by President Habibie and composed of political experts such as Ryas Rasyid and Ramlan Surbakti, played a pivotal role. Their work laid the groundwork for rationalizing and implementing a democratic electoral system that revived political pluralism and provided citizens with multiple avenues for expressing their aspirations. This broader representation also generated a new dynamic in both the DPR and MPR, which began functioning as genuine representative institutions of the people.

The MPR played a crucial role in the presidential election, ultimately selecting Abdurrahman Wahid as president even though his party was not the election’s winner and Megawati Soekarnoputri as vice president. This reflected a new, dynamic political process and coalition negotiation unprecedented in earlier eras. The DPR also began to assert its role as a legislative body and as a check on executive power. Nevertheless, the early years of this new system were challenged by political fragmentation and limited

institutional experience, often resulting in slow decision-making and unstable governance.

Despite these obstacles, the period of 1999–2000 represented a profound political transformation for Indonesia. The transition from authoritarianism to democracy opened up new spaces for political participation and strengthened mechanisms of accountability and checks and balances. However, remnants of corruption and collusion from the New Order era persisted, breeding public skepticism toward the newly elected representatives.

This historical moment finds resonance in *Serat Wicara Keras*, which reflects the ethical and political dimensions of leadership and representation during this transitional period. The text's emphasis on humility, justice, and restraint serves as a moral commentary on Indonesia's political reformation, illustrating how cultural wisdom continues to inform the nation's democratic discourse.

**Saksat kinarya kalipah, têngêse apan gêgênti, têka kurang panggraita. Parandene kudu bêcik, apa margane bêcik. Sok buwang sarak tur lêngus, masa silih antuka. Malah jiniwiring cicir, pangrasane dudu gêtih lawan kama.**

Translation into English:

As one is appointed as a khalifah a successor one must not be deficient in discernment. Nevertheless, one must always pursue goodness by any righteous means. Should one abandon the principles of syari'ah or become easily offended, it will be impossible to achieve true results; one's efforts will instead scatter and disintegrate. Such a disposition is as though devoid of the essence of life of blood and seed.

Following the resignation of President Suharto, Indonesia's second president, the nation looked to B. J. Habibie his former vice president as a figure deemed more competent in managing the multidimensional crises that emerged in 1998. Although Habibie's tenure as Indonesia's third president was brief, ending in 2000 when he was succeeded by Abdurrahman Wahid (popularly known as Gus Dur) through a democratic election by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), his leadership marked an essential transitional phase toward reform.

Abdurrahman Wahid was widely regarded as a leader imbued with spiritual and intellectual depth embodying the ethos of a *khalifah*, a moral and religious guardian of the people. His leadership intertwined political authority with spiritual wisdom, reflecting

the fusion of governance and ethical stewardship rooted in Indonesian-Islamic thought.

The period of 1999–2000 thus represented a crucial moment in Indonesia’s political transformation, defined by the emergence of pluralism and diverse representation. The 1999 general election participated in by forty-eight political parties signaled the birth of new voices and the end of monolithic dominance within the legislature. Political dynamics shifted toward open competition, with the president and vice president chosen through transparent deliberations in the MPR, reflecting genuine contestation among political factions. Coalitions and oppositions evolved dynamically, transforming the parliament into an active arena of political oversight.

Furthermore, the reform era strengthened the system of checks and balances as the House of Representatives (DPR) began to exercise greater courage in criticizing and interpellating the executive branch. The mass media and civil society organizations also played vital roles as vehicles of public aspiration voicing criticism, mobilizing collective action, and amplifying public discourse. With the restoration of press freedom and the expansion of civic participation, this period embodied a form of “*wicara keras*” a forthright political speech culture symbolizing a healthy transformation toward a more transparent, competitive, and participatory democracy.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the discussions presented in this paper, *Serat Wicara Keras* can be understood as a literary work that functions not only as a medium of moral instruction but also as a mirror reflecting the political condition of Java from the nineteenth century to the colonial period. It reveals profound social criticism toward power structures and the political irregularities of its time. The text encapsulates the internal conflicts within Javanese society, its dependency on colonial authorities, and the persistent struggle to restore moral integrity and the legitimacy of the king as both a spiritual and political leader.

Furthermore, the textual analysis demonstrates that *Serat Wicara Keras* emerged as a critical response to political corruption and moral decay an embodiment of truth-telling and moral courage expressed through literary form. It represents the resilience of both the common people and moral leaders in confronting systems rooted in feudalism and colonial domination.



This work also illustrates how historical and socio-political realities of Java's past are articulated through symbolism and traditional literary expression, serving as a subtle yet incisive form of critique. Over time, the substance of *Serat Wicara Keras* has remained relevant as a reflection of struggle, resistance, and the preservation of national sovereignty from the colonial era to the Reformasi period. Its enduring resonance demonstrates the continuity of the Indonesian people's spirit in pursuing justice, integrity, and self-determination.

Therefore, *Serat Wicara Keras* stands as both a cultural document and a symbolic act of resistance a crucial intellectual and political artifact for understanding the dynamics of power, morality, and social transformation in Java and Indonesia more broadly.

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