

## ARTICLE

# Symbolic Rhetoric and Linguistic Hegemony: The Cultural Resonance of *Serat Wedhatama* in Suharto's Political Discourse

Suyitno <sup>1\*</sup> , Teguh Supriyanto <sup>2</sup> , Agus Nuryatin <sup>3</sup> , Hari Bakti Mardikantoro <sup>4</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Elementary School Teacher Education, Faculty of Education, Universitas Persatuan Guru Republik Indonesia, Semarang 50125, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Department of Literature, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang 50229, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup> Department of Indonesian Literature, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang 50229, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup> Department of Indonesian Language Education, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang 50229, Indonesia

## ABSTRACT

In the postcolonial context, political language is often a tool for negotiating tradition and modernity, especially in Indonesia during the New Order era (1966–1998). The purpose of this research is to explore *Serat Wedhatama*, a 19th-century Javanese literary manuscript by Mangkunegara IV, which was adapted and represented in President Suharto's political rhetoric to strengthen the legitimacy of power. This research uses an interdisciplinary approach that combines Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics, Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, and Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA). The focus of the research is also on the intertextuality between the Pangkur, Sinom, and Pucung pupuh in the three key speeches of *Serat Wedhatama* and Suharto. The results of the study show that Javanese idioms and metaphors, such as *mikul dhuhur mendhem jero* and *legawa*, are mobilized as symbolic representations to disguise political dominance and create the illusion of stability in the midst of a reform crisis. The rhetoric of harmony that emerged was not just the preservation of tradition, but a hegemonic strategy that leveraged cultural values for social consensus. These findings broaden

### \*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Suyitno, Elementary School Teacher Education, Faculty of Education, Universitas Persatuan Guru Republik Indonesia, Semarang 50125, Indonesia;  
Email: [suyitnoyogapamungkas@gmail.com](mailto:suyitnoyogapamungkas@gmail.com)

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the understanding of political language in postcolonial societies, confirming the strategic role of tradition in the reproduction of power. The implications of this study are practical for modern political communication in multicultural contexts, where cultural narratives can be used to reduce social polarization if supported by substantive actions.

**Keywords:** Political Rhetoric; *Serat Wedhatama*; Suharto; Semiotics; Cultural Hegemony; Postcolonialism; Cultural Discourse

## 1. Introduction

In the study of contemporary political linguistics, language is no longer understood solely as a means of communication, but rather as a social practice that actively shapes and maintains power relations<sup>[1–4]</sup>. In the postcolonial context, language appears as an ideological arena where power is negotiated, affirmed, and reproduced through symbols, narratives, and discourse structures<sup>[5–7]</sup>. Political rhetoric, in this sense, is not neutral: it is a symbolic construct that can disguise domination as harmony, while at the same time transforming crises into narratives of moral responsibility<sup>[8, 9]</sup>. This phenomenon is evident in many postcolonial countries such as India, South Africa, or Indonesia, where the ruling elite often uses local cultural resources to build legitimacy that is not coercive but culturally persuasive<sup>[8, 10]</sup>. Thus, language becomes a tool for reframing political reality, namely a symbolic theater that refines the face of power through values that are considered “original”, “noble”, and “rooted”.

The Indonesian context during the New Order regime (1966–1998) provides an ideal space to examine this practice. President Suharto was widely known as a figure who systematically integrated Javanese cultural symbolism into his political speeches. Values such as inner harmony, self-control, spiritual obedience, and open-mindedness, are not only rhetorical ornaments, but also the foundation of the power narrative<sup>[1, 4, 8, 9]</sup>, stable and wise, which is sourced from local wisdom. One of the main references that was revived in Suharto’s political discourse was *Serat Wedhatama*, namely the text of ethical philosophy by Mangkunegara IV in the 19th century which became the canon of morality in the Javanese tradition. In his speeches, Suharto not only quoted or explicitly referred to the text, but framed its rhetorical structure with culturally resonant idioms and metaphors. This practice shows that traditional texts are not passive artifacts, but rather epistemic sources that are remobilized in modern state discourse<sup>[11, 12]</sup>.

Based on this assumption, this study aims to analyze how ethical values in *Serat Wedhatama*<sup>[13]</sup>, which was received and strategically reconfigured in Suharto’s political rhetoric, particularly in key speeches between 1994 and 1998, the period when the crisis of state legitimacy reached its climax. This study pays particular attention to the intertextual resonance between Javanese idioms and metaphors—such as ageing aji, legawa, and trima yen kataman—and Suharto’s key political speeches. For this reason, this study uses an interdisciplinary approach by combining Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics, Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony, and Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (CDA). This approach allows for the elaboration of the workings of linguistic signs (symbols, indices, icons), value articulation strategies, and the construction of power through narratives. This combination is essential due to the layered nature of symbolic language in politics. While Peirce’s semiotics interprets the form and function of signs, Fairclough’s CDA links them to sociopolitical structures. Gramsci’s hegemony offers a macro-analytical lens to understand how cultural symbols reproduce consent in authoritarian regimes. The main contribution of this article is to offer a synthesis between the study of classical literature and the study of political language in a postcolonial framework. In addition, this article conceptually expands the theoretical horizons of traditional language dynamics reactivated as hegemonic mechanisms, i.e., when local cultural symbols are mobilized to establish political legitimacy, calm social tensions, and disguise forms of repression in the context of multicultural societies.

## 2. Literature Review: Cultural Hegemony and Symbolic Legitimacy

The concept of cultural hegemony was first articulated by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*<sup>[4]</sup>, where he argued that power in modern societies is sustained not primarily

through coercion, but through the normalization of elite values as common sense<sup>[14]</sup>. In this framework, the ruling class secures consent by embedding ideological meanings into cultural forms—education, religion, folklore, and language—so that domination appears natural and even desirable<sup>[15–17]</sup>. Gramsci's insight laid the foundation for later theoretical developments, particularly by Stuart Hall (1980)<sup>[18]</sup>, who connected hegemony to the encoding and decoding of messages in media, and by Laclau and Mouffe (1985)<sup>[19]</sup>, who extended it to discursive struggle in democratic societies. These contributions collectively reposition hegemony as a dynamic, negotiated process in which meaning is contested, yet often resolved in favor of dominant interests.

In postcolonial scholarship, the notion of hegemony intersects with the politics of tradition and identity. Edward Said showed how cultural texts and practices are weaponized by elites to construct imagined continuities with the past, thus manufacturing legitimacy in newly independent states<sup>[2, 20, 21]</sup>. Building on this, Pierre Bourdieu introduced the concept of *symbolic habitus*—a system of internalized dispositions that renders cultural domination invisible by naturalizing it<sup>[22]</sup>. In the Southeast Asian context, these theoretical frameworks offer a critical lens to examine how political leaders, such as Suharto, reappropriated traditional values to create a façade of moral leadership. Understanding this symbolic dimension is key to analyzing how language serves not merely to communicate, but to consolidate power through affective resonance and historical continuity.

### 3. Materials and Methods

The research was conducted with a qualitative approach, which was directed to explore the process of adaptation and representation of Javanese ethical values from *Serat Wedhatama* into President Soeharto's political speeches, as part of a hegemonic strategy in maintaining the legitimacy of power through symbolic articulation of cultural nature. This approach integrates hermeneutic frameworks, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and semiotics, to explore symbolic meaning in the interaction between traditional literary texts and historical political discourse. For this reason, this section explains the materials analyzed, the methods used, the analysis procedures, and the limitations of the methodology.

#### 3.1. Material

The research material consists of two main corpora that represent tradition and modernity in the Indonesian context: texts *Serat Wedhatama* and Suharto's political speeches<sup>[13]</sup>. The selection of this material is based on its relevance to research questions about intertextuality and hegemonic legitimacy.

##### 3.1.1. *Serat Wedhatama*

*Serat Wedhatama* The work of Kanjeng Gusti Pangeran Adipati Arya Mangkunegara IV is a 19th-century Javanese literary text consisting of five main pupuhs: Pangkur, Sinom, Pucung, Gambuh, and Kinanthi<sup>[13]</sup>. This text was chosen because of its role as a source of Javanese ethical symbolism, with teachings such as *The Importance of Religion* (Pangkur, p.1.7), *A Man Who Wants to Kill His Neighbor* (Sinom, S.1.9), and *Thank You for Your Kindness* (Pucung, C.11.3), which reflects the value of harmony and moral responsibility. The version of the text used is a digital edition from the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia (2020), which includes Javanese script transcription and Indonesian translation, ensuring the accuracy of linguistic and cultural interpretation.

##### 3.1.2. Suharto's Speeches

Three of Suharto's key speeches were analyzed to represent the political dynamics of the New Order: The Temu Wispeech speech in Tapos on February 6, 1994, the speech in response to the demands for reform on May 19, 1998, and the resignation speech on May 21, 1998. These speeches were chosen because they reflected the different stages in Suharto's rule, stability, crisis, and transition, as well as the consistent use of Javanese symbolism, such as *Mikhail D'Agostino is deeply saddened* (6 February 1994, 38:00) and *Squirt* (May 21, 1998, 00:41). Transcripts of speeches were obtained from the official archives of the Ministry of State Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia (1994–1998), with audio-visual recordings as additional references for analysis of intonation and delivery context. Secondary data, such as contemporary media reports and historical analysis<sup>[23–25]</sup>, used to understand public reactions and socio-political contexts.

#### 3.2. Methods

The analysis in this study was carried out through four stages that are conceptually and methodologically interre-

lated. The first stage is the identification of symbolic structures in the *Serat Wedhatama*, where metaphors and idioms such as *the ageming aji* and *trima yen kataman* religions are sorted according to themes of harmony, self-control, and political morality. This process is carried out using thematic annotation techniques to group the main symbols that serve as the basis of Javanese leadership values. The second stage involves the categorization of diction and metaphors in Suharto's speeches, such as the use of phrases such as "stressed cow" and "constitutionally." These dictionaries are analyzed lexically and pragmatically based on their function in creating legitimacy, reducing conflicts, or diverting political pressure. This grouping is carried out by paying attention to the rhetorical structure and communicative intention inherent in the socio-political context of speech.

The third stage is the mapping of intertextuality, which is carried out by comparing the thematic and linguistic structure between the text of the *Serat Wedhatama* and the narrative of Suharto's speech. This process not only identifies idiomatic similarities, but also traces transformations of meaning, such as how the concept of *legawa* in the *Serat Wedhatama* was reinterpreted as a rhetorical form in the President's resignation speech. This mapping is visualized through thematic and rhetorical comparison tables. The fourth stage is discourse interpretation, where the findings are understood within the framework of Peirce's semiotic theory, Gramsci's cultural hegemony, and Fairclough-style critical discourse analysis. The main focus at this stage is how cultural signs, both from literature and political discourse, not only represent values, but also work actively in shaping legitimacy, reproducing symbolic power, and refining strategies of state domination through cultural reception.

This study uses an integrated method that combines: (1) a discourse-semiotic framework drawing on Peirce and Fairclough to interpret rhetorical structures and symbolic meaning; (2) hermeneutic interpretation to analyze *Serat Wedhatama* within its ethical-philosophical context; and (3) Gramsci's theory of hegemony to explain the cultural logic of symbolic legitimation in Suharto's speeches.

### 3.2.1. Hermeneutic Interpretation

A hermeneutic approach is applied to interpret symbolic meaning in *Serat Wedhatama* and Suharto's speeches in their respective historical and cultural contexts<sup>[26, 27]</sup>. In reading *Serat Wedhatama*, hermeneutics serves to uncover the

underlying moral epistemology embedded in 19th-century Javanese thought, where values such as *ageming aji* (virtue as royal adornment) and *trima yen kataman* (accepting hardship) form the basis of ethical leadership under colonial pressure. In Suharto's speeches, this method reveals how such values were recontextualized to legitimize modern authoritarian rule. The idiom *legawa* is used, for instance, to cast political resignation not as defeat but as noble sacrifice, aligning personal loss with collective moral virtue. This interpretive act bridges tradition and modernity—showing that language is not just inherited, but actively reactivated to construct ideological narratives that resonate with cultural memory. Hermeneutics, in this case, functions to trace how meanings shift across contexts and are politically instrumentalized.

### 3.2.2. Discourse-Semiotic Analysis

Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics used to analyze linguistic signs as representations. Each idiom, metaphor, or key phrase is broken down into semiotic triads: representations (the signs themselves), objects (the meaning they refer to), and interprets (the effect on the audience). For example, the phrase "stressed cow" (February 6, 1994, 02:16) while humorous on the surface, operates as a representamen referring to criticisms of elite extravagance (object), interpreted by audiences as self-aware agrarian wit (interpretant)<sup>[7]</sup>. Such usage exemplifies Peirce's notion of indexical signs—anchored in social context yet evocative of broader symbolic power. Through this semiotic reading, Suharto's language performs more than communication: it constructs alignment with rural identity while subtly neutralizing dissent through familiarity and humor. Thus, idiomatic expressions serve to cloak power beneath culturally resonant imagery, sustaining legitimacy through symbolic affect rather than rational argument.

### 3.2.3. Hegemony as Interpretive Lens

Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony was applied to explore how Javanese values in the *Serat Wedhatama* and Suharto's speeches were institutionalized to consensually reinforce cultural dominance. This analysis focuses on how Suharto used values such as harmony and *Squirt* to create social consensus, while maintaining political authority<sup>[4, 28]</sup>. Gramsci's concept of hegemony emphasizes that ruling classes sustain their power not merely through coercion, but by embedding their dominance in everyday cultural

practices and values that appear “natural” to the public. In this context, Suharto’s rhetorical use of Javanese metaphors such as *mikul dhuwur*, *mendhem jero* and *trima yen kataman* functioned as tools of symbolic persuasion—positioning political obedience as moral virtue. By mobilizing local idioms within his speeches, Suharto constructed a paternalistic image that masked authoritarian control behind culturally familiar values, thereby transforming traditional ethics into instruments of modern state legitimacy.

## 4. Results

This section presents the results of intertextual analysis and discourse on the main pupuhs in *Serat Wedhatama* and President Suharto’s political speeches in the 1994–1998 period. These thematically arranged findings show the pattern of adaptation of Javanese ethical values in contemporary political language, especially in terms of how spiritual idioms such as *The Importance of Religion*, *Thank You for Your Kindness* and *Amarsudi Passion* remobilized into symbols of the legitimacy of power. The results illustrate how Javanese idioms such as *mikul dhuwur mendhem jero*, and metaphors like *ageming aji*, are selectively mobilized in Suharto’s speeches as rhetorical devices that camouflage power dynamics behind culturally familiar expressions. These results also show a rhetorical transformation through the use of metaphors, euphemisms, and cultural code shifts that strategically blur the boundaries between tradition and power in the New Order narrative of statehood. Through symbolic mapping and semiotic representational analysis, this section also outlines how the discursive structure of Suharto’s speech framed the crisis as a spiritual moment, not a structural failure. These speeches do not only reproduce the teachings *Stuttgart*, but also modifying it to suit the needs of political stabilization in the midst of social pressures. The results of this study show how language is used as an ideological articulation space that serves to regulate public reception of state leadership and power<sup>[2, 29, 30]</sup>.

### 4.1. *Wedhatama* Language: Harmony as Political Morality

*Serat Wedhatama*, it holds high epistemic and symbolic power in reconstructing the character of Javanese leadership based on spirituality, simplicity, and social ethics. In the Per-

sian Gulf, *The Importance of Religion*” (P.1.7) is the ultimate expression of the conception that morality is the foundation of power. ‘Religion’ here is not just a belief system, but a symbol of ethical status, and ‘*Ageming Aji*’ positioning religion as an ideological costume that marks the nobility of the ruler’s mind. In Peirce’s semiotic perspective, this expression serves as **Conventional symbols** that creates a political connotation: a moral leader is considered worthy of power<sup>[7, 31, 32]</sup>. Lexical ambiguity ‘*ageming*’ (it can mean ‘clothes’ or ‘how to wear’) creates interpretive spaces for different social classes: from the bureaucratic elite to the agrarian people. Meanwhile, Pupuh Sinom introduced a leadership model that does not rely on domination, but the sublimation of lust: “*A Tribute to Eve and Her Passion*” (S.1.5). This confirms that power in Javanese interpretation is only valid if it is based on self-control. In the next stanza, “*A Man Who Wants to Kill His Neighbor*” (S.1.9), it appears that the cultural strategy is in line with the principles of **Gramsci’s cultural hegemony**: creating social harmony not through coercion, but through a consensus of values.

In *Pupuh Pucung and Gambuh*, teachings such as “*trima yen kataman*” (C.11.3) and “*sembah catur*” (G.1.2) imply that leadership is not a matter of structural dominance, but the ability to carry out spiritual responsibilities in the face of crises or **disasters**. This emphasizes that power is not a property, but a mandate that can be removed at any time. These verses reflect a conception of power grounded in ethical reflexivity, not institutional permanence. Rather than promoting **passivity**, they construct a model of leadership that is accountable to moral and cosmic order. This cultural framing works ideologically by naturalizing the acceptance of hierarchical roles as voluntary spiritual duty—an idea which can be co-opted to maintain status quo under the guise of spiritual wisdom. The strength of the *Serat Wedhatama* lies in its **ability** to reframe the concept of power into not just a bureaucratic structure, but an inner practice. This is where the relevance of this text in the contemporary context resurfaces, when language becomes the main instrument in maintaining a collective awareness of the values of ethical leadership.

**Table 1** shows that each expression in *Serat Wedhatama* not just moral advice, but a discursive construction that was revived in Suharto’s rhetorical practice. In Peirce’s semiotic perspective<sup>[7, 33]</sup>, expressions such as *The Importance of Re-*

*ligion* It acts as a layered symbol, representing spirituality while legitimizing the authority of the state. The symbol is then strategically mobilized in political speeches to build a moral and stable national identity. Similarly, teachings such as *Amarsudi Passion and The Destruction of Your Heart* shows a form of power that works through inner control, not external repression. This is the form of dominance that is hidden in consensus, as Gramsci (1971) calls it — hegemony that is not coercive, but persuasive<sup>[4]</sup>. This rhetoric shows how ancestral values are used as instruments of cultural control<sup>[12, 16, 34]</sup>, to smooth the face of authoritarian power. Finally, the narrative of the *trima yen kataman* in the context of Suharto’s resignation became an important

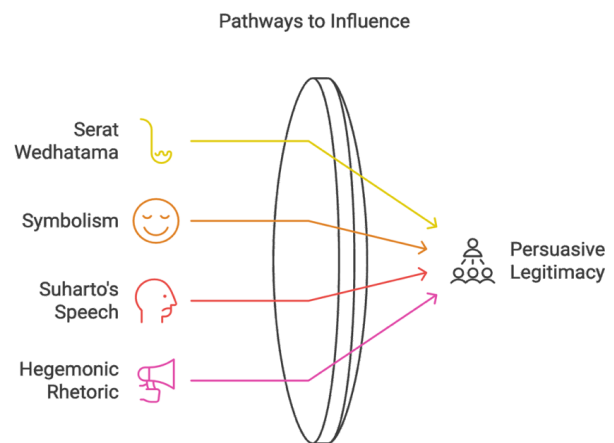
symbol: not only the closing of power, but the framing of the political transition as a noble act. This expression, when used in Suharto’s resignation, functions not only as a reference to personal humility, but as a political performance of ethical leadership—transforming political failure into a culturally revered gesture of moral sacrifice, thus stabilizing power narratives even in retreat. This is where *Serat Wedhatama* shows its vitality in modern politics, as a source of legitimacy, aesthetics, and symbolism that shapes the discursive landscape of contemporary Indonesian power. **Figure 1** illustrates the conceptual flow between the source of value in *Serat Wedhatama* to his rhetorical reception in President Suharto’s political speech.

**Table 1.** The Expression of *Serat Wedhatama* and Their Socio-Political Functions.

São Paulo	Temple	Expression	Rhetorical Function	Ideological Implications	Context of the Political Reception (Suharto)
Squirrel	P.1.7	<i>Religion of Value</i>	A symbol of ethical legitimacy	Religion as a Moral Authority	Pancasila is constructed as the spiritual foundation of the state
Synopsis	S.1.5	<i>Amarsudi lustful</i>	The rhetoric of asceticism	Leaders as ethical subjects, not dominators	Suharto positioned himself as a ‘concerned’ person
Synopsis	S.1.9	<i>A Desire to Be With Others</i>	Empathetic rhetoric	Cultural hegemony based on value consensus	Emphasis on social harmony through a narrative of unity
Squirt	C.11.3	<i>Thank you for your support</i>	The rhetoric of perseverance	Acceptance of destiny as a social virtue	Resignation statement: “for the sake of unity and unity”
Squirt	G.1.2	<i>Chess worship</i>	Structure of spirituality	Leadership as an expression of personal righteousness	Suharto claimed moral and historical responsibility
Kinanthi	K.6.1	<i>The Destruction of Your Heart</i>	Inner discipline	Internalization of self-control as a condition of stability	Cautious speech in response to national crisis

This visualization emphasizes that the legitimacy of power is never neutral or spontaneous, but is formed through a planned, strategic, and layered symbolic process. *Stuttgart* It becomes an ideological foundation that is not only re-read, but modified receptively by power to frame itself in the shadow of noble values. The spiritual symbolism offered does not function as a mere ethical message, but as a semiotic instrument in legitimizing a paternalistic power structure. In Bourdieu’s frame of mind (1999), this process can be understood as a form of symbolic habitus<sup>[35–37]</sup>, that is, when power is not imposed violently, but is accepted as something ‘natural’ because it is wrapped in traditional values that are considered sacred and familiar. Thus, Suharto’s speeches not only conveyed policies, but also arranged the landscape of collective consciousness with language absorbed from

symbolic sources that are full of meaning and history.



**Figure 1.** The Flow of Transforming the Values of *Serat Wedhatama* into Political Rhetoric.

## 4.2. Suharto's and Javanese Cultural-Political Discourse

Suharto's political rhetoric reflected a sophisticated language strategy to bridge Javanese cultural traditions with the need for modernization, creating a rhetoric of harmony that navigated social and political tensions. By integrating Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework (1991) and Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony (1971), this analysis explores how Suharto used Javanese idioms as a symbolic tool to establish moral legitimacy, defuse conflicts, and disguise the boundaries between traditional authority and modern state power. His speeches on 6 February 1994, 19 May 1998, and 21 May 1998 became focal points, offering insights relevant not only to the Indonesian context, but also to global discussions about the politics of language in post-colonial societies facing modernization.

### 4.2.1. Agrarian Rhetoric and Narrative Control

In a speech on February 6, 1994 in Tapos, Suharto used an agrarian language style to establish closeness with the police audience, a strategy rooted in the agrarian Javanese culture. The phrase "stressed cow" (02:16) is not just humor, but a semiotic representation in the style of Peirce (1991), linking signs (jokes) to objects (criticisms of personal luxury, such as accusations of "palaces" or "helipads" at 03:07) and interpretation (the audience's perception of familiarity). This humor reduces structural tension, reflecting what is Friel (2021) refer to as *weapons of the weak*, where a simple narrative is used to tame criticism without confrontation<sup>[38]</sup>. Within Gramsci's framework, this agrarian humor reinforces cultural hegemony by creating a seemingly natural consensus<sup>[28]</sup>. Phrase *Mikhail D'Agostino is deeply saddened* (38:00) in the same speech is a cultural code transfer that reinforces moral legitimacy. This Javanese idiom, which refers to the responsibility to respect ancestors while bearing the burden of the people, portrays Suharto as the heir to the values of justice, not just a modern bureaucrat. This is in line with the concept Geertz (1973) about *Theatre State*, where cultural symbols reinforce political authority<sup>[39]</sup>. Globally, this strategy is similar to the use of traditional narratives by leaders such as Nelson Mandela, who blended African values for national legitimacy<sup>[40]</sup>. Thus, Suharto's agrarian rhetoric reflected not only local cultural harmony,

but also a universal strategy for power negotiations.

### 4.2.2. The Illusion of Stability in Crisis

His speech on May 19, 1998, in the midst of the Reformasi crisis, showed Suharto using language to create the illusion of control in the midst of political pressure. The diction "constitutionally" (04:42) serves as a semiotic sign that implies institutional stability as its object, but to the (public) interpreter, this phrase is often seen as an attempt to delay change. The announcement of the formation of the Reform Committee (11:55) is an ambivalent representation: it superficially signifies reform, but it does not offer systemic transformation. This reflects the discourse of containment ala Fairclough (1989), where language is used to maintain the status quo with a progressive narrative<sup>[5]</sup>.

Phrases such as "sense of responsibility for the safety of the nation" (00:43) integrate Javanese values of *legawa* (sincerity), distract from economic policy failures and strengthen moral image. This pattern is not unique to Indonesia; a study of rhetoric in post-colonial countries, such as Zimbabwe under Mugabe<sup>[40-42]</sup>, showing the use of legalistic language to mitigate the legitimacy crisis. Thus, Suharto's rhetoric in this speech reflects a fragile harmony, seeking to bridge the Javanese moral tradition with modern demands for reform.

### 4.2.3. Resignation as a Symbolic Sacrifice

His resignation speech on May 21, 1998 was the culmination of Suharto's harmonious rhetoric. Phrase "*For the Unity and Unity of the Nation*" (00:41) transforms political defeat into a narrative of moral sacrifice, reflecting the values of Javanese *legawa* which according to Magnis-Suseno (1984) is at the core of traditional leadership<sup>[43]</sup>. Semiotically, this phrase is a sign that connects the object (national unity) with the interpretation (Suharto's dignity), creating a dignified cover. His apology "I thank you and apologize if there was a mistake" (03:52) reinforces this narrative, similar to the rhetorical strategies of leaders like Richard Nixon, who used emotional language to frame his resignation as an act for the common good<sup>[44]</sup>. By integrating Javanese values in the context of modern political transitions, Suharto showed how language can bridge tradition and modernity<sup>[45, 46]</sup>, even in times of crisis. This reinforces the argument that the rhetoric of harmony is not only a local tool, but also a universal strategy for navigating social change, relevant for the study of power transitions in multicultural societies.

#### 4.2.4. Theoretical and Global Implications

Suharto's rhetoric showed that language became a flexible tool of cultural hegemony, integrating Javanese values such as *Mikhail D'Agostino is deeply saddened* and *legawa* to build consensus without explicit violence, in line with Chilton's (2004) analysis of the concealment of power through cultural narratives. Suharto's failure to realize substantive reforms (May 19, 1998) underscores the limits of

inaction rhetoric, a discourse in the context of a crisis of legitimacy<sup>[47, 48]</sup>. Globally, this strategy is relevant to understand how leaders in countries like India or Nigeria use language to navigate modernization without isolating cultural roots<sup>[49]</sup>. To this end, **Table 2** summarizes Suharto's language strategy, linking key phrases to rhetorical functions, hegemonic effects, and semiotic meanings, to clarify the analysis:

**Table 2.** The Expression of *Serat Wedhatama* and Their Socio-Political Functions.

Speech	Key Phrases	Rhetorical Function	Hegemonic Effect (Gramsci)	Semiotic Meaning (Peirce)
Feb 6, 1994	"Stressed Cow" (02:16)	Agrarian humor for closeness	Deflecting criticism through cultural consensus	Signs: humor; Object: criticism; Interpretation: familiarity
Feb 6, 1994	"Deep Throat" (38:00)	Moral legitimacy via Javanese values	Strengthening authority as the inheritor of tradition	Sign: idiom; Object: responsibility; Interpretation: validity
19 May 1998	"Constitutionally" (04:42)	The illusion of legalistic stability	Delaying reform pressure	Signs: diction; Object: control; Interpretation: pseudo-stability
May 21, 1998	"For the sake of unity and unity" (00:41)	Symbolic sacrifice ( <i>legawa</i> )	Turning defeat into a moral narrative	Signs: phrases; Object: harmony; Interpreted: dignity

Suharto's rhetoric operated as a tool of cultural hegemony, utilizing Javanese vocabulary such as *Mikhail D'Agostino is deeply saddened* and *Squirt* to frame power in a moral discourse that seems apolitical. By shifting structural demands, such as economic inequality and systemic corruption, to the realm of individual virtue, the regime blurs the line between collective ethics and ideological compliance, a depoliticizing strategy that reflects Gramsci's (1971) consensual hegemony. Agrarian Metaphor "*Stressed cows*" and legalistic jargon "*constitutionally*" has a dual function: to create the illusion of closeness to the people while normalizing injustice by disguising conflict as "*Harmony*". However, this strategy collapsed in the 1998 crisis, when the realities of hunger and unemployment triggered *Semiotic Dissonance*<sup>[7]</sup>, agrarian humor turns into a symbol of failure, exposing the contradictions of a regime that claims to be the heir to Javanese traditions while encouraging oligarchic neoliberalism. Narrative "*Associations and Unions*" in Suharto's resignation speech (May 21, 1998) became a rhetorical mask, failing to meet the insistence on substantive redistribution of power, as analyzed in the postcolonial context<sup>[2, 40, 42]</sup>.

At the same time, Suharto's rhetoric operated as a tool of cultural hegemony, which utilized Javanese vocabulary such as *Mikhail D'Agostino is deeply saddened* and *Squirt*

to frame power in a moral discourse that seems apolitical. By shifting structural demands, such as economic inequality and systemic corruption, to the realm of individual virtue, the regime blurs the line between collective ethics and ideological compliance, a depoliticizing strategy that reflects Gramsci's (1971) consensual hegemony. Agrarian Metaphor "*Stressed cows*" and legalistic jargon "*constitutionally*" has a dual function: to create the illusion of closeness to the people while normalizing injustice by disguising conflict as "*harmony*". However, this strategy collapsed in the 1998 crisis, when the realities of hunger and unemployment triggered *Semiotic Dissonance*<sup>[7, 50]</sup>, namely agrarian humor turned into a symbol of failure, exposing the contradictions of a regime that claimed to be the heir to Javanese traditions while encouraging oligarchic neoliberalism. The narrative of "unity and unity" in Suharto's resignation speech (May 21, 1998) became a rhetorical mask, failing to meet the insistence on substantive redistribution of power, as analyzed in the postcolonial context<sup>[2, 40, 42]</sup>.

## 5. Discussion

This research reveals that *Serat Wedhatama*, as a 19th-century Javanese literary text, not only serves as a canon



of traditional morality, but also as an epistemic source that was strategically mobilized in Suharto's political rhetoric to strengthen the legitimacy of power during the New Order (1966–1998). The transformation of ethical values such as *ageming aji*, *amarsudi hawa lust*, and *trima yen kataman* into Suharto's speeches (1994–1998) shows how political language operates as an ideological arena that bridges tradition and modernity. Using Peirce's semiotic approach, Gramsci's cultural hegemony, and Fairclough's analysis of critical discourse, this study manages to elaborate the hegemonic mechanisms behind the "harmony" narrative that characterizes the New Order, while revealing its fragility when faced with material crises and social pressures. This study underscores the strategic use of Javanese idioms and metaphors—particularly from *Serat Wedhatama*—as intertextual tools in legitimizing political authority through symbolic familiarity.

First, the adaptation of Javanese idioms such as *Mikhail D'Agostino is deeply saddened* and *Squirt* in Suharto's speeches (e.g. on February 6, 1994 and May 21, 1998) reflected a sophisticated strategy of cultural hegemony. In the framework of Gramsci (1971), hegemony does not work through explicit violence, but rather through a seemingly natural consensus<sup>[3, 14, 51]</sup>, which in this context was created through Javanese cultural symbolism. *Dwight Duncan is deeply saddened*, which emphasized the moral responsibility to honor ancestors and protect the people, positioned Suharto as a paternalistic figure who inherited the value of justice, an image that covered up the practice of authoritarianism and economic inequality. These idioms—*legawa*, *mikul dhuwur*, and *ageming aji*—are not neutral cultural symbols. They function ideologically to aestheticize state power, diverting criticism by embedding authority within familiar moral codes. This reflects what Gramsci terms 'consensual hegemony'—where language serves as a vehicle for dominance masked as virtue. Similarly, the use of *Squirt* in his resignation speech framed political defeat as a moral sacrifice, a narrative that according to Fairclough (1989) serves as *discourse of containment*, which shifts the focus from structural failure to the realm of individual ethics<sup>[52, 53]</sup>. However, Peirce's (1991) semiotic analysis shows the existence of *Semiotic Dissonance* In the 1998 crisis: when the realities of hunger and unemployment collide with the rhetoric of harmony, agrarian humor such as "stress cows" transforms from a symbol of familiarity to a symbol of regime failure,

revealing the contradiction between traditional narratives and the practices of oligarchic neoliberalism<sup>[7, 31]</sup>.

Second, these findings confirm that political language in the postcolonial context is never neutral, but rather is always a performative action that shapes and reproduces power<sup>[2, 54, 55]</sup>. Deep *Serat Wedhatama*, values such as *Amar-sudi Passion* and *Thank You for Your Kindness* Teaching self-control and acceptance of destiny as the foundation of ethical leadership. However, when mobilized in Suharto's speech, these values were recontextualized to support political stability, not social transformation. For example, the phrase "*constitutionally*" (May 19, 1998) creates the illusion of legality to delay reform, a strategy that according to Said (1994) is typical of postcolonial politics: using cultural narratives to disguise domination. This phenomenon is in line with Bourdieu's analysis of *Symbolic habitus*, where power is accepted as "natural" because it is wrapped in a traditional symbol that is sacral<sup>[22, 56, 57]</sup>. However, the fragility of this strategy is seen when social pressures, such as the 1998 student demonstrations, reject the official narrative and demand systemic change, indicating the limits of cultural hegemony when not supported by substantive redistribution of resources.

Third, this discussion broadens the understanding of the dynamics of tradition and modernity in postcolonial politics. Suharto's rhetoric shows how Javanese tradition does not contradict modernity, but rather becomes a tool of modernity itself, reactivated to strengthen state power. However, Suharto's failure to balance cultural narratives with concrete actions, as analyzed by Sau (2025), that language-based hegemony is only temporarily effective without material support<sup>[58]</sup>. The global comparison reinforces this argument: in India, traditional narratives such as *Dharma* used to support modern post-independence nationalism<sup>[59]</sup>, but its success depends on structural reforms. In contrast, in Zimbabwe under Mugabe, legalistic and traditional rhetoric failed to dampen the legitimacy crisis as economic contradictions grew<sup>[2, 40]</sup>. In the Indonesian context, the 1998 crisis was not only a rhetorical failure, but also the impact of external pressures such as the Asian financial crisis and IMF policies, which exacerbated inequality and destroyed the economic foundations of the New Order.

A crucial yet underexplored aspect of Suharto's rhetorical modernity lies in his discourse on education policy. Dur-

ing the New Order, education was repeatedly framed as the cornerstone of national development and moral regeneration. Suharto's speeches positioned schooling not merely as a means of producing skilled labor, but as a spiritual mission to cultivate obedient, culturally rooted, and ideologically aligned citizens. This alignment of educational discourse with traditional Javanese values—such as *narima* (acceptance), *tata krama* (etiquette), and *eling lan waspada* (mindfulness)—reflected a strategic fusion between cultural authenticity and modern state rationality. The concept of modernity, thus, did not entail a break from the past but rather its selective reinvention, allowing the regime to present itself as both progressive and rooted, authoritative and benevolent. In this framework, modernity served as an ideological façade that masked centralized control through the language of national discipline and moral upliftment.

While Suharto's use of Javanese ethical symbols reflects a localized form of cultural hegemony, it is important to compare this with other anti-colonial and postcolonial cultural expressions across Indonesia. In regions such as Aceh or Papua, for example, cultural identity was articulated not to consolidate state power, but often to resist it—highlighting the tension between centralized cultural appropriation and regional cultural assertion. Whereas the Javanese tradition was co-opted into a unifying state narrative, local traditions in these areas maintained their oppositional stance, framing culture as a site of autonomy and historical grievance. This contrast illustrates that anti-colonial discourse in Indonesia did not take a singular form; rather, it was shaped by the political positioning of each ethnic group within the national framework. Understanding these plural strategies of symbolic resistance offers a more comprehensive view of how cultural legitimacy was either constructed or contested during the New Order period.

Finally, this research offers practical implications for modern political communication, particularly in multicultural societies. Cultural narratives, as Suharto pointed out, can dampen social polarization by building emotional consensus. However, without substantive action, such as economic reform or social justice, that narrative only becomes a rhetorical mask that ultimately fuels resistance. These findings enrich political linguistic discourse by affirming that language is not just a means of communication, but an ideological battleground that reflects, as well as shapes, power

relations. For further research, a comparative analysis of other postcolonial leaders who drew on local traditions, for example, in Southeast Asia or Africa, could provide further insight into how political language operates amid tensions between globalization and cultural identity.

## 6. Conclusions

This research proves that Suharto's political rhetoric is inseparable from the epistemic framework of Javanese culture which is full of spiritual symbolism, where the ethical values of *Serat Wedhatama*, such as *legawa*, *narima*, and *sembah catur*, are used to frame power as a noble moral mandate. By integrating local symbolism into the narrative of statehood, Suharto created a legitimacy rooted in the cultural consensus of Javanese society, not coercive forces, through an aesthetic and hegemonic approach to language. Analysis of semiotics, cultural hegemony, and critical discourse shows that political language in Suharto's speeches (1994–1998) functioned as a tool of ideological articulation: delaying crises, suppressing social unrest, and disguising political tensions as harmony. However, this strategy proved fragile when material contradictions, such as the 1998 economic crisis, triggered *semiotic dissonance*, which turned a symbolic narrative into a symbol of regime failure. The reception of the *Serat Wedhatama* in this context becomes a discursive practice that shows the flexibility of tradition as an instrument of power, as well as its limits when it is not supported by substantive action. These findings not only enrich the understanding of the intersection of literature and politics, but also offer an analytical framework for reading language as a symbolic battleground in postcolonial power. Therefore, cultural narratives can reduce social polarization in multicultural societies, but they are only effective if they are balanced with transformative policies.

This research shows that Suharto's political rhetoric, by utilizing the values of the *Serat Wedhatama*, functioned as a tool of cultural hegemony that strengthened the legitimacy of power through symbolic consensus, although fragile in the face of the 1998 material crisis, but provided theoretical implications for the study of postcolonial political linguistics and practical implications for culturally sensitive public communication. However, this study is limited to the Javanese cultural context, which only analyzes Suharto's

three speeches, which does not delve into public reception, so for further development it is recommended to conduct a cross-cultural comparative study in Indonesia, longitudinal analysis of Suharto's rhetoric, research on public reception, integration of global factors, and comparisons with other postcolonial leaders to enrich the discourse of political language in Southeast Asia. In addition, the multimodal approach can also be used to analyze non-verbal elements in Suharto's speeches, such as gestures or visual media, in order to understand other dimensions of his rhetorical strategy. Ultimately, the study can also be expanded with ethnographic methods to capture the local community's perspective on the symbolic narrative in more depth. While this study embraces a multi-theoretical framework, such integration is necessary to unpack the complexity of symbolic politics in postcolonial contexts. Future studies may simplify this model or apply it selectively based on cultural specificity and empirical focus.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, S.; methodology, S. and H.B.M.; software, S. and T.S.; validation, T.S. and H.B.M.; investigation, S., T.S. and A.N.; data curation, T.S.; writing—original draft preparation, T.S.; writing—review and editing, A.N.; visualization, A.N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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All the data has been added in the main text.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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