

Revealing Aspect of Culture through Literature: Learning from Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana

Mahdori¹; Fathu Rahman²; Rahmad Faisal¹; Teguh Pratama Aditya Mochammad¹; Somadi Sosrohadi¹; Fahdi Sachiya²

¹Universitas Nasional Jakarta, Indonesia

²Hasanuddin University

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Abstract: This research explores the relationship between culture and literature, focusing on how culture is revealed through literary works. It is inspired by the thoughts of Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana (STA), an Indonesian writer and cultural figure who lived from 1908 to 1994. His ideas remain highly influential in literary and cultural studies today. The study aims to uncover relevant approaches for revealing culture through literary analysis and to trace STA's intellectual legacy, both as a writer and a cultural thinker, in introducing new ideas for shaping a "New Indonesia." This library research relies on document studies, analyzing STA's ideas, perspectives, and the opinions of others regarding his contributions to literature and culture. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study logically and systematically explains the function and role of literature in preserving culture, while also recognizing literature itself as an integral part of a society's cultural identity. The findings suggest that STA's thoughts and ideas on cultural development form a foundational framework for building a modern cultural identity, aligned with the vision of a new, progressive Indonesia.

Keywords: Culture, Literature, Literary Criticism, Humanism, Ideology.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Literary studies can reveal cultural elements through textual and contextual approaches. The textual approach focuses on the literary text itself, emphasizing its intrinsic elements. In contrast, the contextual approach examines extrinsic aspects, connecting literature to external factors such as environmental awareness, societal norms, history, and cultural context (Rahman, 2018, 2024; Suma et al., 2023). This approach is particularly relevant to the study of culture through literature, which is the focus of this discussion.

Analyzing literary works helps uncover various aspects of life, as literary studies and cultural studies share a strong intersection—both focus on texts as cultural products. Literature and culture are deeply interconnected, shaping a society's identity. Literature serves as both a reflection and expression of human thought, emotions, and experiences. The relationship between literature and culture plays a vital role in shaping cultural identity, preserving traditions, and documenting history. Literary creation can also enhance cultural expression and interaction, fostering diversity.

Some key examples of the link between literature and culture include:

- Epic literary works, such as the Ramayana, which has been adapted into various local contexts, shaping the character and cultural identity of nations.
- Ancient Malay chronicles, which narrate the histories of kingdoms and legendary figures across different ethnic groups.
- La Galigo, a literary masterpiece from South Sulawesi, recognized as the longest literary work in the world.
- Cross-cultural and multilingual literary works, which reflect cultural fusion due to colonialism, trade, and human migration, showcasing the movement and exchange of people and ideas.
- Literary works containing social criticism, which can influence readers' perspectives and even transform cultural norms. Such literature serves as a historical record of human experiences and societal evolution. Literature, as a record of human experience, is conveyed through the medium of language and shared with others. It provides meaning and awareness to readers, offering profound insights into life's truths, even when presented

through fictional narratives.

In contemporary literary and cultural studies, several approaches are commonly used: 1) The textual approach, which focuses on the literary text itself as a primary method of analysis. 2) Anthropological literary theory, which highlights the close relationship between literature and various aspects of daily life. 3) Anthropological literary theory (further application), which is particularly effective in uncovering hidden cultural meanings within literary texts. Through this perspective, readers can analyze and interpret cultural elements embedded in literature, making it a valuable tool for understanding and preserving cultural heritage.

II. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

According to Koentjaraningrat (1985) The terms culture and civilization are closely related. Linguistically, the word civilization originates from the Arabic root *adab*, while in Western tradition, it derives from the Latin words *civis* and *civitas*, meaning citizen and city-state. Etymologically, culture and civilization are synonymous, both referring to the entirety of human societal life. However, as the concepts evolved, civilization generally came to be defined as the highest forms of culture, including technology, science, architecture, governance systems, literary masterpieces, and more. Culture has been defined in various ways by scholars across different periods. One of the oldest and most comprehensive definitions comes from E.B. Tylor, as cited by Sardar and Loon (1997, p. 4), in his book *Primitive Culture* (1871). This book became a foundational reference for cultural studies and played a significant role in the development of cultural sciences.

According to Tylor (1871), culture encompasses the entire spectrum of human activities, including knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs, and other habitual practices. A more contemporary definition, which aligns with Tylor's but emphasizes the role of society, was proposed by Harris (1999, p. 19). Harris defines culture as all aspects of human life within society, acquired through learning, including thoughts and behaviors. According to Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana (1908–1994), culture is the embodiment of human intellectual activity in responding to life's challenges and the values one upholds.

Literature and culture are interconnected in various aspects. Literature, through imagination and creativity, represents emotional expression, while culture primarily involves rational thought and intellectual development. Culture engages with nature through technological advancements, economic and political systems, and other disciplines, whereas literature processes the world through written expression. In this regard, literary works are understood as creating a new world, a 'world in words', which manifests in various forms such as novels, dramas, and poetry. Meanwhile, culture focuses on preserving the achievements of human civilization.

Both literature and culture study humanity, making them closely related as they both center on human intellect and consciousness. Literature flourishes through imaginative and creative abilities, emphasizing emotional depth, while culture primarily evolves through reasoning and intellectual pursuits. Human attitudes and behaviors are fundamental to culture, which consists of a series of actions performed by individuals in their environment. Culture takes shape within a social system, enabling people to connect, interact, and collaborate according to traditions, customs, and artistic achievements. Any historical events that remain undocumented can be preserved through literary works.

Culture examines human life from an objective and empirical perspective. Objectivity means that the truth or outcome of culture is based on general understanding, experience, discovery, or action. On the other hand, literature is subjective, as literary works emerge from personal interpretations rather than universal truths. Ultimately, literature and culture—both etymologically and pragmatically—are inseparable, much like two sides of the same coin. Both belong to the realm of spiritual and intellectual enlightenment, serving as reflections of human thought and wisdom.

III. OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES OF THE STUDY

Based on the topic of this study, "Revealing Culture Through Literature: Learning from Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana (STA)," the objectives are formulated as follows: first, to explore relevant approaches for uncovering culture through literary studies, and second, to trace the intellectual legacy of Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, both as a writer and a cultural thinker, in introducing new ideas toward the vision of a "New Indonesia." For STA, one of the essential steps in this process was encouraging human life to progress toward modernity.

To achieve these objectives, one effective strategy is to examine the functions of literature as a medium that records and preserves human cultural achievements. Another strategy is to analyze STA's thoughts and contributions, particularly his commitment to cultural development and his literary works as a tool for that purpose. With his brilliant ideas, STA demonstrated that literature plays a significant role in shaping and advancing culture.

IV. THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

This paper identifies several strategies to enhance the role of literature in shaping culture. Literature serves as a medium to depict the uniqueness, richness, and diversity of a nation's culture. It plays a crucial role in preserving and safeguarding the noble values embedded within a nation's culture, ensuring they are passed down to future generations. Additionally, literary works often contain social critiques, which can influence readers' perspectives and contribute to reshaping or transforming cultural norms over time.

Beyond preservation and critique, literature fosters cultural diversity by promoting understanding and appreciation of different traditions, thereby enriching a society's collective identity. Furthermore, literary studies play a significant role in preserving regional cultures and identities, ensuring that they remain relevant and accessible to future generations. Through these functions, literature continues to serve as both a historical record and a transformative force, helping cultures evolve while staying connected to their roots.

V. **INDONESIAN WRITER AND CULTURAL FIGURE: SUTAN TAKDIR ALISJAHBANA**

Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana (STA) was born in Natal, Tapanuli, North Sumatra, on February 11, 1908. He was the second of twelve siblings. His mother was originally from Natal, but she was not of Mandailing or Batak descent; instead, she came from the Minangkabau ethnic group. His father, Raden Alisjahbana, held the noble title Sutan Arbi, which was later recognized by the Yogyakarta Sultanate. His father was a teacher who also worked as a tailor, traditional lawyer, watch repair expert, and football player. Meanwhile, STA's paternal grandfather, Sutan Mohamad Zahab, was a renowned Islamic scholar with extensive knowledge of religion and law (Wikipedia).

In 1925, STA was sent to Hogere Kweekschool in Bandung, but he left a year before completing his final class. He then continued his education at Hoofdacte Cursus in Jakarta, which provided the highest teaching qualification in the Dutch East Indies at that time. In 1941, he earned a Meester in de Rechten (Mr.) degree from the Rechtshogeschool (Law College) in Jakarta. Additionally, in 1942, he briefly studied at the Letterkundige Fakulteit (Faculty of Literature) in Jakarta (Hadi, 2011).

While in Jakarta, particularly during his time at Balai Pustaka, STA engaged with many prominent intellectuals of the Dutch East Indies, both native Indonesian and Dutch scholars. One of his closest colleagues was Armin Pane. After Indonesia gained independence, STA expanded his intellectual horizons by studying philosophy in Germany, the Netherlands, France, the United States, and Japan. In 1948, he traveled to Amsterdam to attend the Philosophy Congress.

STA began his literary career at a young age. His first published work, "*Tani Brieven*" (*Surat Petani*), appeared in the magazine Jong Soematera when he was 15 years old and still a third-year student at a teacher training school in Muara Enim. His talent as a writer became evident when he completed his first novel, "*Tak Putus Dirundung Malang*" (1929). He wrote this novel in Bandung while recovering from a three-month illness due to a heart condition, and it was later published by Balai Pustaka.

One of his most famous works is the novel *Layar Terkembang* (1936), which discusses women's emancipation. This was followed by *Grotta Azzura* (1979) and *Kalah dan Menang* (1978), both of which explore

philosophical and cultural issues. Commenting on *Kalah dan Menang* in an article published in *Tempo* magazine (October 1978), S.I. Poeradisastira stated that no Indonesian novel before had ever tackled a theme as vast and profound as the one written by STA at that time (Poeradisastira, 1978).

The novel *Kalah dan Menang* features several historical figures, though their names have been altered. In addition to prose, STA wrote poetry extensively, including *Tebaran Mega* (a collection of poems, 1935), *Lagu Pemacu Ombak* (a collection of poems, 1978), and *Perempuan di Persimpangan Zaman* (a collection of poems, 1985).

In the field of literature, STA was a leading figure in the *Pujangga Baru* literary movement. He founded and led *Pujangga Baru* magazine, the first Indonesian journal dedicated to literature and culture. STA rejected traditional literary forms such as pantun (rhymed quatrains) and *syair* (classical poetry), advocating instead for modern poetry, particularly the sonnet form. He famously declared, "Let us discard and forget the old literature and build a new one." While leading *Panji Pustaka*, he launched the "New Literature" movement in 1933.

With a background in teacher education, STA spent a year teaching at HKS in Palembang (1928-1929). He later became a lecturer in Indonesian language, history, and culture at the University of Indonesia (1946-1948). From 1950 to 1958, he served as a professor of Indonesian language, literary philosophy, and culture at the National University of Jakarta. Additionally, he was appointed Professor of Indonesian Grammar at Andalas University, Padang (1956-1958) and later became Professor and Head of the Malay Studies Department at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur (1963-1968), along with other academic roles.

According to Hadi (2011), STA's intellectual framework was deeply rooted in humanism, which evolved in Europe from the Renaissance to the rise of neopositivism. His humanist perspective was built on three major intellectual narratives: 1) The liberation of humanity from the constraints of mythology and religion, a thought that reached its peak with the rise of René Descartes' rationalism and John Locke's empiricism, later synthesized by Immanuel Kant in his idealism. 2) A philosophical alignment with the "Geist" (spirit) found in Hegelian idealism and Romantic thinkers such as Fichte and Schelling. 3) The hermeneutics of meaning, as proposed by historicism advocates like Wilhelm Dilthey.

These three narratives contributed to the emergence of secular humanism and rational fundamentalism, replacing earlier worldviews in which human thought was constrained by mythology and religion. Various sources indicate that STA viewed philosophy as a synthesis of multiple disciplines, influenced by neopositivism and rooted in Locke's empiricism, Comte and Mill's positivism, and Hegel's idealism. According to STA (1977: 2), philosophy offers a path for humanity to progress through truth, stating that "the deepest understanding of truth is the ultimate and

sole objective."

STA combined Locke's empiricism, Comte and Mill's positivism, and Hegel's idealism, as he believed Comtean positivism limited individual freedom. In Comte's view, individual liberty was subordinated to society, and society, in turn, was subject to nature. According to Franz Magnis-Suseno (2005: 132-133), Comte held that human rationality could only develop by conforming to society's rational processes. STA sought to counter this subjugation of individual thought and expression by incorporating Hegelian idealism into his philosophy. In STA's view (Alisjahbana, 1977), reality is both a product of human intellect and a continuous movement of values.

VI. STA'S THOUGHTS ON HUMANITARIAN VALUES

Among scholars, writers, and cultural figures in Indonesia, Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana (STA) is recognized as a thinker with distinct perspectives on humanitarian and cultural values. For STA, humanitarian values are not solely taught in classrooms but can also be conveyed through literature. His strong belief in the role of literature reflects his conviction that ethics is the core of individual life, society, and cultural existence as a whole. Through literature, individuals can internalize humanitarian values and ethical principles. A broader understanding of cultural issues, both in Indonesia and globally, is only possible when cultural behavior is viewed within the context of ethical formation and value assessment.

In presenting his cultural studies, STA described culture as a configuration of values. He identified six universal values that shape human civilization: aesthetic-artistic values, religious values, scientific-theoretical values, economic values, solidarity values, and political values. Literature serves as a medium for encapsulating and expressing these values. Various sources indicate that STA's perspective aligns with the views of German philosopher and educator Eduard Spranger (1882–1963), who also emphasized the role of values in shaping human thought and behavior.

VII. THE MAJOR WORKS OF SUTAN TAKDIR ALISJAHBANA

As part of his intellectual struggle, STA believed that one could learn about culture through literary works. His contributions to literary and cultural studies were vast, encompassing novels, grammar studies, philosophy, and cultural philosophy.

STA is often regarded as the "dawn of Indonesian modernism." His ideas and thoughts reflect a strong vision for building a modern Indonesia—even before the nation officially existed. Through his writings on literature, language, philosophy, and culture, STA remained committed to advocating for Indonesia's progress. As a prominent figure in literature, linguistics, cultural studies, intellectualism, and philosophy, STA produced numerous

influential works (Hadi, 2011), including:

- *Tak Putus Dirundung Malang* (novel, 1929),
- *Dian Tak Kunjung Padam* (novel, 1932),
- *Tebaran Mega* (A collection of poems, 1935),
- *Tatabahasa Baru Bahasa Indonesia* (1936),
- *Layar Berkembang* (novel, 1936),
- *Anak Perawan di Sarang Penyamun* (novel, 1940),
- *Puisi Lama (bunga rampai, 1941),*
- *Puisi Baru (bunga rampai, 1946),*
- *Pelangi (bunga rampai, 1946),*
- *Pembimbing ke Filsafat* (1946),
- *Dari Perjuangan dan Pertumbuhan Bahasa Indonesia* (1957),
- *The Indonesian Language and Literature* (1962),
- *Revolusi Masyarakat dan Kebudayaan di Indonesia* (1966),
- *Kebangkitan Puisi Baru Indonesia* (A collection of essays, 1969),
- *Grotta Azzura* (A three-volume novel, 1970 & 1971),
- *Values as Integrating Forces in Personality, Society and Culture* (1974),
- *The Failure of Modern Linguistics* (1976),
- *Perjuangan dan Tanggung Jawab dalam Kesusastraan* (A collection of essays, 1977),
- *Dari Perjuangan dan Pertumbuhan Bahasa Indonesia dan Bahasa Malaysia sebagai Bahasa Modern* (A collection of essays, 1977),
- *Perkembangan Sejarah Kebudayaan Indonesia Dilihat dari Segi Nilai-Nilai* (1977),
- *Lagu Pemacu Ombak* (A poetry collection, 1978),
- *Amir Hamzah Penyair Besar antara Dua Zaman dan Uraian Nyanyian Sunyi* (1978),
- *Kalah dan Menang* (novel, 1978),
- *Menuju Seni Lukis Lebih Berisi dan Bertanggung Jawab* (1982),
- *Kelakuan Manusia di Tengah-Tengah Alam Semesta* (1982)
- *Socio-cultural Creativity in the Converging and Restructuring Process of the Emerging World* (1983),
- *Kebangkitan: Suatu Drama Mitos tentang Bangkitnya Dunia Baru* (A verse drama, 1984),
- *Perempuan di Persimpangan Zaman* (A poetry collection, 1985),
- *Seni dan Sastra di Tengah-tengah Pergolakan Masyarakat dan Kebudayaan* (1985),
- *Sajak-sajak dan Renungan* (1987)

STA's legacy includes more than 30 works, significantly contributing to the development of language, culture, and literature in Indonesia. In addition to his original works, Hadi (2011) notes that STA also authored and edited several books and contributed to translated works, including:

- *Kreativitas* (a collection of essays, 1984)
- *Dasar-Dasar Kritis Semesta dan Tanggung Jawab Kita* (a collection of essays, 1984)
- *Nelayan di Laut Utara* (translated from *Pierre Loti*,

1944)

- *Niku dan Korban Manusia* (translated from *Tadayoshi Sakurai*, co-translated with Soebadio Sastrosatomo, 1944)

Furthermore, according to Hadi (2011), STA received several prestigious awards in recognition of his contributions to literature and culture, including:

- Satyalencana Kebudayaan from the Government of Indonesia in 1970.
- Honorary Doctorate (Doctor Honoris Causa) from Universitas Indonesia (1979) and Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang.

The Order of The Sacred Treasure, Gold and Silver Star, awarded by Emperor Hirohito of Japan for his role in strengthening Indonesia-Japan relations. The honor was presented by Japanese Ambassador to Indonesia, Sumio Edamura, on December 10, 1987 (Hadi, 2011).

VIII. SUTAN TAKDIR ALISJAHBANA'S VISION FOR A NEW INDONESIA

As a social being, humans create culture to fulfill their needs. By nature, humans can be viewed from two perspectives: on one hand, they are natural beings, subject to the laws of nature governing their physical existence; on the other hand, they are intellectual beings, governed by the laws of reason (Alisjahbana, 1979: 1). According to STA, it is human submission to the laws of reason that defines their humanity and enables them to create a high civilization.

As a writer and cultural thinker, STA had one great ambition in life: to lead Indonesia toward becoming a developed nation. He envisioned a progressive and independent Indonesia, capable of standing on equal footing with the world's leading nations. The path to achieving this vision, according to STA, was to prepare individuals with strong character, independence, intellectual freedom, and moral integrity. He believed that true human freedom lies in the ability to choose values that serve as motivation, guidance, and ultimate goals for one's actions and behavior. He emphasized that reason is the foundation of all cultural life, distinguishing human conduct from animal instinct and natural existence from cultural life. In his view, culture is nothing more than the manifestation of human intellect (Alisjahbana, 1975: 6).

STA looked to dynamic Western civilization as a model because he wanted Indonesia to quickly advance in science, economic development, and rational technology. He saw Indonesia's cultural progress as incomplete, with high levels of scientific and technological development yet to be achieved, and economic prosperity still out of reach. According to Suseno (2005: 143), STA's vision for Indonesia was bold: on one hand, Indonesia should strive to become as modern as possible, but on the other, it must preserve its unique cultural identity. In doing so, Indonesia would contribute a distinct and beautiful heritage to the universal civilization of humankind (Suseno, 2005: 143).

IX. CRITICAL NOTES ON SUTAN TAKDIR ALISJAHBANA'S THOUGHTS

As someone who never ceased striving for the advancement of Indonesian culture, Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana (STA) employed various approaches, including politics, intellectual discourse, education, organizations, and literary creation. He firmly believed that literature played a crucial role in conveying his ideas and contributing to public education. STA's critical perspective was that culture is reflected in art, language, literature, philosophical and religious thought, spirituality, moral ideals, philosophy, and theoretical sciences. Meanwhile, civilization is reflected in practical politics, economics, technology, applied sciences, social etiquette, and the implementation of laws and regulations. According to Hadi (2011), STA's views on culture can be summarized as follows:

He approached culture from a philosophical and historical perspective on civilization. Since the Cultural Polemic era, STA had advocated modernization, emphasizing the transition from a static culture to a progressive one. STA believed that the only way to achieve an advanced culture and civilization was by fully embracing the essence of Western culture, which had evolved from the Renaissance to the Age of Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), the rise of German idealism, and later Romanticism and neopositivism.

This perspective contrasted with that of Ki Hajar Dewantara, who saw national culture as the peak of regional cultures. Instead, STA argued that national culture should be a modern culture, one that enables Indonesia to compete with advanced nations such as Europe, the United States, and Japan. STA once stated that centuries of colonialism had left Indonesia marginalized, impoverished, and underdeveloped in the eyes of the world. To revive the nation, he emphasized the need for major cultural reforms and transformations. In his intellectual pursuit, STA concluded that the most fundamental issue for humanity is ethics in relation to values. In this context, ethics can be interpreted as morality, ethos, civility, and virtue. According to STA, the relationship between ethics and values is the central issue of culture itself.

X. CONCLUSION

- Culture cultivates human intellect through technology, including economics, politics, and various scientific disciplines, whereas literature processes nature through the power of writing. In this context, literary works are understood as a means of constructing a world, creating a "world in words". This results in the emergence of different literary forms such as novels, dramas, and poetry.
- Part of STA's intellectual struggle was his belief that literature serves as a medium for learning about culture. His contributions to literature and cultural studies were diverse, spanning novels, grammar studies, philosophy, and cultural philosophy. STA is regarded as the "dawn of Indonesian modernism." His ideas and writings reflected a strong vision for building a modern Indonesia, even before the country's independence.
- STA adopted dynamic Western culture as the foundation

of his intellectual orientation because he envisioned Indonesia as a nation that should rapidly advance in knowledge, economic growth, and rational technological development. He saw Indonesian culture as constantly in transition, requiring continuous evolution and progress.

- STA's vision for Indonesia was that it should become a modern nation while preserving its unique cultural identity. He believed that Indonesia's cultural distinctiveness contributed beautifully to the universal heritage of humanity.

Finally, to demonstrate that cultural aspects can be revealed through literature, one can examine STA's work titled *Kebangkitan, Suatu Drama Mitos tentang Bangkitnya Dunia Baru* (A Mythical Drama on the Rise of a New World), published in 1984.

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