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Narrative Negotiation and Cultural Transformation: The Impact of the Reinterpretation of the Mahabharata Epic in Puppet Comic Authored by Teguh Santosa

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Abstract

The *Mahabharata* puppet comic by Teguh Santosa possesses distinctive characteristics, particularly its realistic visual style rendered through sharp black-and-white illustration techniques. The *Mahabharata* narrative within the comic incorporates extensive elements of Javanese cultural identity. This study aims to examine Teguh Santosa's epic puppet comic *Mahabharata* through the lens of articulation theory. The development of comics in Indonesia has been strongly influenced by Western cultural traditions. Both the form and content of comics are often associated with foreign cultural expressions, such as American comic art, while the *Mahabharata* story itself originates from India. However, in the hands of comic artist Teguh Santosa—whose works have been published from 1984 to the present—there is a clear effort to construct an epic puppet comic *Mahabharata* that embodies an Indonesian identity. Employing a critical qualitative descriptive design, this research investigates the articulation of identity discourse within comic cultural practices. Data derived from Teguh Santosa's comic works were analyzed using comic theory and articulation theory. The findings indicate that the articulation of Indonesian identity in the comic is expressed through adaptations of cultural values within the *Mahabharata* narrative and the insertion of regional (Javanese) language, reflecting the cultural background of the comic artist.

1. Introduction

The *Mahabharata* epic Puppet comic occupies a significant position in the history of comic art and popular culture in Indonesia. As a product of popular culture, comics are generally regarded as a

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form of entertainment and a source of moral values, particularly among readers who engage with the stories of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Yet, beyond mere entertainment, comics also embody a range of ideas, aspirations, and ideologies—what this study refers to as the articulation of identity—a topic that has rarely received serious academic attention within the still limited body of comic scholarship in Indonesia.

Despite developments that have taken place since the emergence of comics in the 1930s, it can be said that, aside from the work of Bonneff (2008) on the history of Indonesian comics and Ajidarma (2011) on the *Panji Tengkorak* comic, Indonesian comics remain insufficiently examined to support comprehensive discussions about the medium. The presence of the *Mahabharata* epic Puppet comic has shaped the landscape alongside the influx of popular Western comics. Although it competed with Western titles that captivated American readers in the 1940s and 1950s—such as Alex Raymond's *Rip Kirby*, Wilson McCoy's *The Phantom*, and Frank Robbins' *Johnny Hazard* (Bonneff, 1998, p. 22)—the *Mahabharata* epic Puppet comic nevertheless succeeded in establishing itself and being embraced by the public as a distinctly Indonesian comic. In this sense, it attained notable popularity.

This popularity emerged from two key factors. First, the *Mahabharata* epic Puppet comic helped challenge the perception of comics in Indonesia as a form of low art. The social stigma surrounding comics has long been deeply rooted, strengthened by what may be described as "cultural toxins" that enforce distinctions between high and low art. Western influences further reinforced such divisions in Indonesia. Prior to the *Mahabharata* epic Puppet comic, comics were often dismissed as low-quality reading material intended for children. A society shaped by such traditions naturally accepted this dichotomy as normal. Thus, when examining aesthetic phenomena in Asian societies, one must consider broader dichotomies such as the contrast between "elite" and "popular" art or "art" and "craft" (Geertz, 1997, p. 87).

Second, the *Mahabharata* epic Puppet comic reflects Indonesian cultural identity, countering the notion that comics are fundamentally Western cultural products. As Bonneff (1998, p. 28) notes, the presence of Indonesian identity within the comic contributed to its widespread acceptance. The comic's articulation of Indonesian identity marks it as a form of negotiation within ideological contestations in the comic sphere. The outcome of this negotiation reveals a sense of confidence, signifying independence in the formation of cultural identity. This process aligns with Christine Gledhill's concept of negotiation, described as follows (in Ajidarma, 2011, p. 7):

"For the term 'negotiation' implies the holding together of opposite sites in an ongoing process of give-and-take. As a model of meaning production, negotiation conceives cultural exchange as the intersection of processes of production and reception."

The term "negotiation" is fitting because the *Mahabharata* epic Puppet comic continues to allow for diverse forms of heroism that provide readers with the satisfaction of witnessing the defeat of evil. Although it adopts Western theoretical frameworks of panel transitions and does not feature the *punakawan*, and although its narrative adheres more closely to Indian sources than to the versions performed by Javanese *dalang*, the *Mahabharata* epic Puppet comic nonetheless embodies Indonesian cultural identity as a product of global culture.

Teguh Santosa's *Mahabharata* epic Puppet comic—although not analyzed primarily through the lens of publication history—places emphasis on its content, which contains meaningful discussions relevant to interpreting the negotiation of Indonesian identity narratives. These narratives serve as markers of difference from both Western and Indian cultural references. The attempt to articulate Indonesian identity within a narrative derived from India is particularly noteworthy; the internalization or recreation of Indian identity into Indonesian cultural forms adds an important dimension to understanding how Indonesian narrative negotiations take shape within the realm of

popular comic culture.

This research offers a significant contribution to the study of Indonesian comics and popular culture by presenting an in-depth analysis of the narrative negotiation process in Teguh Santosa's *Mahabharata* epic Puppet comic. Employing a cultural studies approach, the study demonstrates how Santosa transforms the classical Indian epic into a visual narrative that resonates with modern Indonesian social and ideological contexts.

Theoretically, this research enriches discussions on adaptation and intertextuality in Indonesian comics, particularly regarding intersections between the Puppet (*wayang*) tradition and modern popular media. It also provides a new perspective on how local identities and values are negotiated through processes of visual and narrative adaptation. Practically, the findings contribute to the development of Indonesian comic studies as a medium for cultural representation and character education. The results may be utilized by academics, comic artists, and creative media practitioners to better understand the dynamics of transforming traditional narratives into popular formats.

This study employs clearly defined limitations to maintain analytical focus and depth in accordance with its objective: examining the form and meaning of narrative negotiation in Teguh Santosa's *Mahabharata* epic Puppet comic. The limitations are threefold: (1) *Object limitations*: the study focuses solely on Teguh Santosa's *Mahabharata* epic Puppet comic as the primary source of data. Other versions or adaptations of the *Mahabharata*—including film, theater, novels, or comics by other authors—are not analyzed in depth, except when used for contextual intertextual comparisons. (2) *Analytical limitations*: the analysis centers on narrative and discursive elements, including plot structure, characterization, and conflict as key narrative components; intertextual relations between the classical *Mahabharata* and its comic adaptation; and representations of values, ideologies, and cultural contexts that emerge from the adaptation process. (3) *Contextual limitations*: the study focuses on negotiations of meaning between the Indian epic narrative and Indonesian cultural contexts, particularly Puppet (*wayang*) values and local moralities represented in the comic. It does not explore in depth the historical publication context or the full biography of the author, except where relevant to narrative formation. With these limitations, this research is structured to provide a focused, in-depth, and contextual analysis of how Teguh Santosa negotiates the classical *Mahabharata* narrative into forms and meanings aligned with Indonesian culture through the medium of comics.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design to explore the construction of identity articulation in comics. As a study of verbal and visual texts or discourses, it does not require a specific field location. Although interviews could have been conducted in any setting, they were carried out in Denpasar. Meanwhile, data collection took place in several locations, including Denpasar, Yogyakarta, and Jakarta. Data analysis was conducted based on the theoretical framework formulated for this study, namely, an analysis of the comic's visual form and the construction of narrative articulation in the *Mahabharata* Puppet comic. These visual codes operate as cultural signifiers, functioning as what Barthes (1977) describes as the semiotics of the image

This analysis integrates comic theory and articulation theory. McCloud (2007) defines comics as images and symbols juxtaposed in a specific sequence to convey information and/or elicit an aesthetic response from the reader. According to McCloud, comics utilize five communicative choices: (1) Moment Choice, which connects meaningful moments and eliminates less important ones through panel transitions—moment to moment, action to action, subject to subject, scene to scene, aspect to

aspect, and non-sequiturs; (2) Frame Choice, which highlights key visual points for the reader and establishes place, position, and focus, involving frame size, shape, camera angle, distance, height, balance, and centering; (3) Image Choice, which creates clear and precise representations of characters, environments, objects, and symbols; (4) Word Choice, which communicates ideas, dialogue, and sound in a clear and persuasive manner that integrates with the image; and (5) Plot Choice, which guides the reader through the sequence of panels (McCloud, 2007, p. 15).

This study applies narrative analysis with a hermeneutic approach. This approach enables the researcher to examine how the classical *Mahabharata* narrative is negotiated, adapted, and reinterpreted in modern comic form. Narrative analysis focuses on: (1) Narrative structure—how plot, characters, conflicts, and resolutions are constructed; (2) Representation strategies—how text and visuals interact to generate meaning; and (3) Ideology and cultural context—how local values, nationalism, and cultural reinterpretation emerge in the retelling of the classical epic. The hermeneutic approach is used to interpret visual and verbal signs in the comic, while articulation analysis traces the relationship between the comic text and its original source (the Indian *Mahabharata*) and the Indonesian Puppet tradition.

A text, practice, or event is not a fixed source of meaning but a site where articulation occurs—where meanings or variables of meaning are actively produced. Articulation refers to the notion that meaning in cultural practices and texts is never permanently determined by the producer; instead, it emerges through active processes of use (Ajidarma, 2011, pp. 66–67). Methodologically, articulation is grounded in experience. Experience plays a central role in Cultural Studies and, similarly, in articulation. According to Slack (2005), articulation operates at three levels: epistemological, political, and strategic. The epistemological level reveals how every fragment of a social unity—every subordinate element—matters and is recognized within a larger order. The political level concerns the prioritization of power relations that shape interactions between subordinate groups (commoners, proletariat, lower classes) and dominant groups (rulers, upper classes). At the strategic level, articulation becomes a mechanism for sharpening participation in a particular social formation or context—examining the strategic efforts undertaken by subordinate groups to remain part of a dominant social formation (Hall, 2005, p. 113).

Research steps

For data collection, the primary object of analysis was Teguh Santosa's Puppet Epic *Mahabharata* comic. Supporting data included: the original *Mahabharata* text, references to Javanese Puppet culture, interviews with or biographical writings about Teguh Santosa, and academic literature related to adaptation and comics studies. During data classification and selection, the researcher focused on comic sections that demonstrate processes of narrative negotiation, such as modifications in characterization, plot streamlining, or reinterpretation of moral values. Units of analysis included panels, dialogues, narrative texts, and visual elements (e.g., poses, expressions, settings, and symbols).

Data analysis consisted of four stages. The first stage (narrative structural analysis) involved identifying plot patterns, character functions, and forms of conflict for comparison with the classical epic. The second stage (hermeneutic analysis) interpreted visual and verbal cues to identify new meanings generated within the comic's context. The third stage (intertextual analysis) examined the relationship between the source text (the classical *Mahabharata*) and the comic version, particularly how local elements—Puppet traditions, Javanese moral values, and the Indonesian social context—were incorporated. The fourth stage (ideological analysis) interpreted cultural, political, and moral messages emerging from the comic's narrative negotiations. Interpretation and conclusions were drawn by synthesizing the results of narrative, hermeneutic, and intertextual analyses to explain the forms and meanings of narrative negotiation in the comic. These conclusions illuminate how Teguh

Santosa's work reflects processes of cultural adaptation and the formation of Indonesian identity through popular media.

3. Results and Discussions

Puppet Comic by Teguh Santosa

The Indonesian identity embedded in Teguh Santosa's Puppet comics is evident primarily in their visual design. The characters in the *Mahabharata* Puppet comics are based on the iconography of human puppets, yet the proportions in Teguh Santosa's works do not closely follow temple relief iconography. Instead, the characters are rendered through a highly realistic approach informed by mathematically calculated human anatomy, reflecting the influence of Western realist styles.

Visually, Teguh Santosa's Puppet comics differ markedly from those of Kosasih. Teguh employs perspective with considerable freedom, resulting in numerous depictions of extreme angles. These dramatic perspectives reflect his background as a film enthusiast, viewing comics as a medium for visual aesthetics with the unique advantage of freezing movement. The fusion of Western narrative techniques with traditional puppet characters becomes a defining feature of his Puppet comics.

The language used in the comics is Indonesian, interspersed with regional (Javanese) expressions. The narrative style is notably more concise than that of Kosasih and Gun Gun. Teguh Santosa's *Mahabharata* also includes distinctive narrative choices, such as the characterization of Draupadi—who, though polyandrous in the Indian epic, is depicted here as married only to Yudhisthira. Likewise, the comic introduces Antasena, the son of Bima, who does not appear in the Indian *Mahabharata* but is present in the Javanese puppet tradition.

The comic also provides explicit notes highlighting differences between the Indian and Indonesian versions. For instance, in the Indian narrative, the infant Karna is cast into the Yamuna River at the suggestion of Surya and eventually adopted by Adirata's wife, who names him Aradea. In the Indonesian (Javanese) version, Karna is cast into a river and discovered by Prabu Radea, King of Petapralaya, who adopts him and names him Radea Putra.

These characteristics illustrate Teguh Santosa's articulation strategy, which emphasizes Indonesian identity through visual, verbal, and narrative elements. His work demonstrates that Indonesianness in comics is constituted through visual identity (puppet iconography rendered through filmic aesthetics), verbal identity (the use of Indonesian and Javanese), and narrative identity (the negotiation and adaptation of epic content).

Teguh Santosa also experiments extensively with inking techniques—from heavy block shading to ink-wash approaches—making his style easily recognizable. Using brushes and pens, he constructs contour lines, volumes, internal dimensions, and filled areas. Like the master comic artists of earlier generations, Teguh manages all stages of comic production himself, unlike most contemporary comic artists who divide tasks. His comic work is therefore highly controlled and shaped closely to his own visual intentions.

Visual Identity Articulation

Characteristics of Indonesian identity in Teguh Santosa's Puppet comics share similarities with those of Kosasih, particularly in their grounding in the iconography of human puppets. However, the character proportions in Teguh's works diverge from those found in temple reliefs, adopting instead

a realistic anatomical approach rooted in Western visual epistemology. Despite this realism, Indonesian (especially Javanese) identity remains evident through the characters' puppet costumes.

Teguh Santosa's depiction of Gatotkaca reflects the Javanese tradition: he is presented as handsome, capable of flight, and marked with a star on his chest—a character of central importance in the *Mahabharata*. At the political level, Teguh visually highlights distinctive forms of weaponry such as the *supit urang* (spike) used by Bima and Arjuna—renderings that differ from those of other comic artists and emphasize the characters' unique identity within the epic. At the epistemological level, he depicts Krishna as a flying figure, diverging from Indian narratives where Krishna does not possess the ability to fly. Strategically, this choice reflects Teguh's interpretation of Krishna as a divine incarnation of Vishnu endowed with extraordinary abilities. These strategic visual articulations differentiate Teguh's *Mahabharata* from Indian versions and reinforce its Indonesian character. This Indonesian-specific articulation is also evident in the inclusion of Antasena, Bima's son who appears only in the Javanese puppet tradition.

The visual depiction in Teguh Santosa's Puppet comics differs significantly from that of Kosasih. From a visual epistemology standpoint, Teguh's liberal use of dramatic perspective reflects his filmic sensibilities, viewing comics as a medium for aesthetic image presentation with the ability to freeze action. The fusion of Western narrative structures with traditional puppet characters gives his work a distinct visual dynamism.

The visual imagery in Teguh Santosa's *Mahabharata* is rendered in a realistic black-and-white style. Characters are constructed through black contour lines without color, and consistent with the cover design, only the comic's title is printed in red. Facial expressions are given significant emphasis during dialogue, contrasting sharply with R.A. Kosasih's depictions, where expressions of anger, irritation, or sadness are less pronounced. This heightened expressiveness is one of the defining features that distinguish Teguh Santosa's visual epistemology from Kosasih's.

Although Teguh creates his own interpretations of the characters, the narrative of the Puppet *Mahabharata* is rooted in leather and East Javanese puppet traditions (interview with Masdiono, 2023). His characters merge realistic human anatomy with Indonesian puppet aesthetics. The combination of traditional puppet costume references and Teguh's imaginative interpretation is stated explicitly in his comic notes (2009, p. 76):

Now we move on to the Indian version (the original Mahabharata), which is the main storyline of the Mahabharata story that I have been telling you since the beginning! However, for the sake of greater communication, I present the costumes based on puppet clothing in our country, combined with my own imagination to make them more flexible for presentation in comic form (cergam).

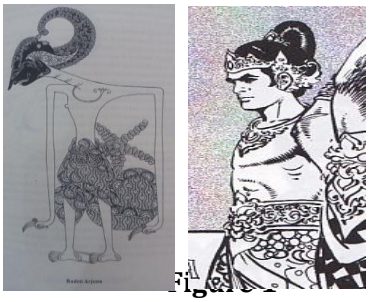


Figure 1
The Javanese puppet of Arjuna and his comic depiction by Teguh Santosa
Source: Budiharjo, 1997

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between East Javanese leather puppets and the characters of Bima and Arjuna in the *Puppet Mahabharata* comic. In both the leather puppets and the comic versions created by Kosasih and Gun Gun, the *supit urang*—a distinctive headdress worn by the two Pandawa brothers—is depicted as a head ornament that partially covers the hair. However, Teguh Santosa's depiction differs: in his version, the *supit urang* is positioned directly over the curl of the character's hair. This characteristic, closely resembling the style of East Javanese leather puppets, distinguishes Teguh Santosa's visual interpretation from those of other artists. Santosa incorporates this East Javanese cultural identity to preserve local cultural values within the broader global comic tradition, which is shaped significantly by Western hegemony. This creative decision also functions as a visual marker of Teguh Santosa's artistic identity.

The characters' facial expressions in Teguh Santosa's work are rendered with a high level of detail (Figure 2). His framing technique primarily employs rectangular borders, but he also makes use of pseudo-panels that integrate panel-like divisions among other visual elements. The panels in Teguh Santosa's *Puppet Mahabharata* demonstrate controlled variations in ink intensity across different components. Suggestive lines are applied to skin, clothing, and other surfaces to differentiate materials while also conveying volume and depth.



Figure 2
Character expressions in the epic Mahabharta comic Puppet by Teguh Santosa
Source: Teguh Santosa, 2009

The transformation of the verbal text of the *Mahabharata* into visual narrative is executed through striking black-and-white block imagery. The puppet characters in Teguh Santosa's *Mahabharata* are rendered using intricate linework and solid black forms. In the field of fine art, this visual strategy is known as *chiaroscuro*. Teguh Santosa's application of chiaroscuro represents the pinnacle of his artistic creativity as a comic illustrator. During his time, very few artists were able to master or further develop this technique—an achievement that remains exceptional even in contemporary comic production.

The chiaroscuro technique imbues the panels with dynamism and atmosphere. From a design perspective, Teguh Santosa also sought to capture filmic qualities, now commonly referred to as *mise-en-scène*, in which the artist composes the pictorial setting as if arranging a theatrical stage, complete with characters, blocking, and props (Gunawan, 2015, p. 117). In cinematic practice, this technique is widely used to depict spatial dimensions within frames. The sharp contrasts between light and shadow heighten dramatic tension and amplify the emotional expressions of the characters. The strategic use of shadow and black blocks becomes a significant element in achieving compositional

balance throughout Santosa's work. Extreme and dramatic scenes are frequently employed and have become hallmark visual characteristics of Teguh Santosa's comics.

Santosa demonstrates a strong inclination toward experimenting with various inking methods, ranging from solid black blocking to ink-washing techniques, which are distinctly identifiable in his oeuvre. Employing both brush and pen, he constructs contour lines, builds volumetric form, defines interior depth, and fills areas with texture or shadow. In the tradition of earlier master comic artists, Teguh Santosa undertook all stages of comic production independently—a contrast to the more specialized and divided workflows common among contemporary comic creators. As a result, his comics exhibit a high degree of artistic control, reflecting his full creative vision.

Visually, the backgrounds are meticulously rendered. Forest environments and palace architecture are constructed using bold black-block techniques. In certain panels, however, backgrounds are left entirely white—or filled entirely black—to reinforce the emotional state of a character. Emotional tone is conveyed primarily through facial expressions, yet Santosa also uses diverse background patterns—such as small circles, vertical lines, and combinations of vertical, horizontal, diagonal, and curved lines—to communicate shifts in lighting and mood. These visual strategies demonstrate Santosa's careful attention to aesthetic detail. The power of the images is deliberately harnessed to captivate readers, making the comic not only a narrative medium but also a visually compelling entry point for studying the *Mahabharata*.

An additional visual strategy used to articulate Indonesian cultural identity is the inclusion of the character Antasena. Antasena, the son of Bima and Dewi Nagagini—the daughter of Hyang Antaboga, the serpent deity of Saptapratala—appears only in the Javanese version of the epic. His presence reinforces the localized interpretation embedded in Santosa's adaptation.

Articulation of Language Identity

Teguh Santosa's epic puppet comic *Mahabharata* also articulates Indonesian linguistic identity through its use of written text (typography) and lexical choices. The text is set in a sans serif typeface, characterized by the absence of ornamental strokes. The spelling system used in Santosa's comic follows the contemporary Indonesian orthography, distinguishing it from R.A. Kosasih's *Pewayangan* comic from 1966, which employs the older spelling system—for example, *cerita* ("story") written as *tjeritera*.

The verbal text appears within rectangular narrative panels that serve to clarify events and provide contextual explanation, functioning as a complement to the illustrations. Several significant names in the story are emphasized in bold type, including those of Yudhisthira, Bima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadewa, as well as members of the Kurawa faction such as Duryudana, Dursasana, and Jayawikata. These textual emphases assist in character identification and narrative orientation. On the opening page of Teguh Santosa's *Mahabharata* (2009, p. 1), verbal text is used to present a prefatory note in which Santosa introduces his comic adaptation of the epic story.

Mahabharata is a kakawin that originates from India, with the story about Bharatayuda, namely the great war between the descendants of Bharta, the Pandavas (children of Pandu) and the Kauravas (children of Drestarata). The Mahabharata was written by a Rishi (ascetic) named Wyasa, who lived +_ 200 years before Christ, but then developed until +_ 200 years after AD, so that in total there were +_ 90,000 verses (seloka).

Explanations presented as comic captions are not consistently placed at the bottom of the panel; rather, their placement is highly flexible. Captions may appear at the top, left, or right side of the panel. These captions, which elucidate the events occurring within the panel, are neatly enclosed in

rectangular boxes. Such placement allows the panel to function as a visual field in which the verbal text supports either the character's expression or the depicted background situation, while the caption provides narrative clarification of the ongoing events.

Additionally, the characters' dialogue is conveyed through speech balloons. Each type of speech balloon carries a distinct communicative significance. The speech balloons (Figure 3) employed by Teguh Santosa in his *Mahabharata* epic Puppet comic consist of several forms, each indicating a different mode of speech. The first type comprises balloons used for ordinary dialogue. These are drawn in a smoothly curved shape—either circular or elliptical—and include a pointer that directs toward the speaking character. Such balloons indicate neutral, everyday conversation, free from emotional intensity such as anger or agitation.

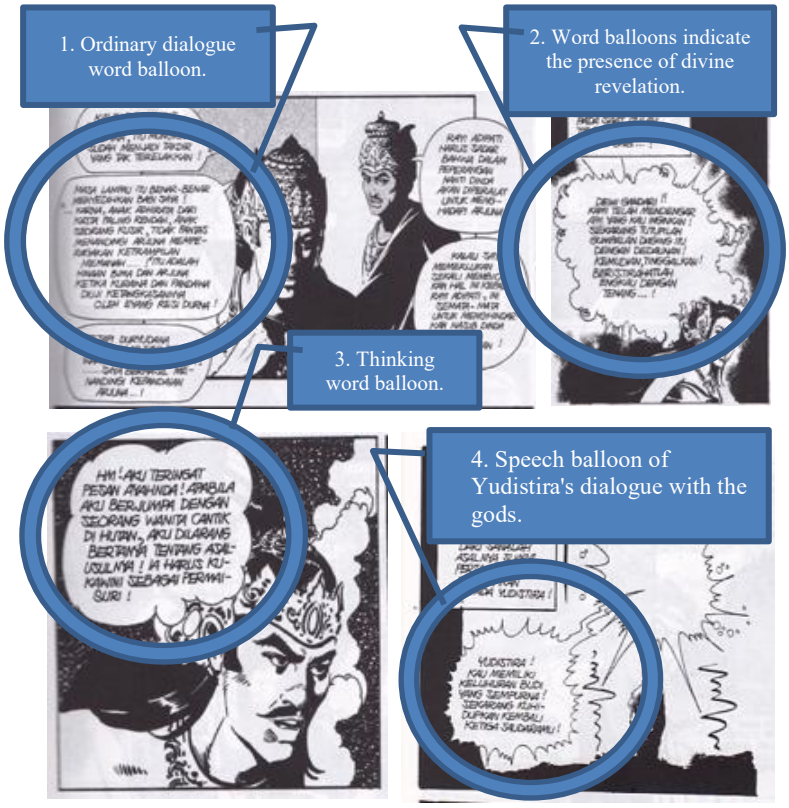


Figure 3
Word balloons in the epic Mahabharta comic Puppet by Teguh Santosa
Source: Teguh Santosa, 2009

Moreover, a speech balloon shaped like a glowing smoke bubble signifies a divine revelation. This type of balloon appears without any depiction of the speaking character and thus functions as a space through which the voice of an unseen figure is expressed. Third, a speech balloon resembling a cluster of bubbles, with a circular form that gradually narrows toward the character in the panel, indicates that the character is thinking or speaking internally. Fourth, a speech balloon shaped like a burst of light signals a dialogue with a deity, such as the conversation between Yudhisthira and Bhatara Dharma.

Teguh Santosa consistently maintains visual focus within each panel. For instance, when emphasizing a character's conversation, the background is simplified using only lines. Dialogue plays a significant narrative role in Teguh Santosa's Puppet comics. Because the Mahabharata is an extensive epic that ideally demands numerous images, Santosa reduces visual density by strategically relying on verbal text.

The primary language used in Teguh Santosa's *Puppet Mahabharata* comic is Indonesian. Although puppet discourse was historically expressed in Old Javanese in leather-puppet (*wayang kulit*) and human-puppet performances, Javanese remained widely used. The use of Indonesian in Teguh Santosa's comic—similar to its use in Gun Gun's Puppet comic—is crucial for ensuring broader accessibility among readers. As a form of popular culture, comics can be read at any time, without requiring audiences to attend an all-night puppet performance of the *Bharatayudha*.

Alongside Indonesian, Teguh Santosa's *Puppet Mahabharata* comic also incorporates Javanese. In character dialogues, the verbal text is written in a sans serif font and occasionally includes regional vocabulary. Examples include "kakang mbok," used to address an older sister respectfully, and "kangmas," referring to an older brother. Santosa's integration of regional language brings the narrative closer to its cultural community and reflects local identity. The use of regional languages is also common in Javanese, Balinese, and other Indonesian performing arts, such as localized adaptations of the story "Sampek Eng Tay" in Javanese, Madurese, and Balinese. When such practices appear in comics, they function as deliberate creative strategies to engage readers. This tight integration of image and text aligns with Eisner's (1985) concept of expressive sequential art."

Narrative Negotiation

The narrative style in Teguh Santosa's Puppet comic is much more concise than that of Kosasih and Gun Gun. Santosa's version also portrays Draupadi as a non-polyandrous figure, meaning she marries only one man. His comic contains several additional narrative distinctions between the Indian and Indonesian versions of the Mahabharata. For example, in the Indian version, after Karna's birth he is cast into the Yamuna River at the suggestion of Sang Hyang Surya. The infant is discovered by Adirata's wife—a charioteer's wife from the Hastinapura palace—and is given the name Aradea. In the Indonesian (Javanese) version, the baby is cast into a river and found by King Radea of Petapralaya, who adopts him and names him Radea Putra.

Teguh Santosa narrates the Mahabharata from the birth of Bhishma to the birth of the Pandawa Seda within only 472 pages of visual comic panels. Many events are significantly compressed. For example, Yudhisthira's marriage to Draupadi is represented through a single caption rather than through sequential panel transitions as found in R.A. Kosasih's Puppet comic. Santosa recounts the event solely through caption-based narration.

Santosa also provides explanatory notes on the story of Srikandi, acknowledging two distinct versions. The widely known Javanese Puppet version, based on the Yasadipura text (written by a Surakarta court poet), depicts Srikandi as the daughter of King Drupada who eventually masters archery and marries Arjuna. In this narrative, Srikandi is portrayed as a woman skilled in military arts. In contrast, the Indian version described by Santosa depicts Srikandi as a woman who later becomes a man; born female, Srikandi transforms into a man in adulthood and marries the daughter of King Hiranyawarman.

Another narrative divergence appears in the story of the Konta weapon. In Santosa's comic, Karna receives the Konta because the god Narada mistakenly gives it to him for the purpose of cutting Gatotkaca's umbilical cord, mistaking Karna for Arjuna. In the Indian version, however, Karna acquires the Konta weapon by exchanging his *tamsil* clothing with the god Indra, who appears disguised as a *begawan*. Indra requests the *tamsil* garments in exchange for the powerful weapon.

Santosa's *Puppet Mahabharata* also includes a sub-story featuring Antasena, Bima's son. This character appears only in the Javanese tradition and is absent from the Indian version. Antasena possesses extraordinary powers. The gods, however, believe that his participation in the Bharatayudha war would disrupt the divine order of the conflict. To prevent this, Krishna, through an act of strategic cunning, causes Antasena to be killed by his own supernatural abilities. Like R.A. Kosasih, Teguh Santosa employs his own narrative strategy in recounting the Mahabharata. He adapts Javanese sub-stories and frequently chooses verbal explanation over visual sequences to condense the expansive epic. Indonesian cultural identity within Santosa's comic is reinforced through additions that distinguish the Indonesian (Javanese) Mahabharata from the Indian version. These articulation strategies include: (a) The narrative of Antasena's death, engineered by Krishna before the Bharatayudha war to prevent Antasena's participation and preserve the divine destiny concerning the fall of the Kauravas and their allies; and (b) The dual versions of Aswatama's death. In Santosa's comic, Aswatama dies as a result of Krishna's curse. In the Javanese version, however, Aswatama is killed by the Pasopati weapon. According to this version, after murdering Pandawa soldiers, Aswatama enters a room where he sees Parikesit, Arjuna's infant grandson. When Aswatama attempts to kill the child, Parikesit awakens and kicks the Pasopati arrow lying beside him. The arrow flies forward and strikes Aswatama in the neck, killing him. The Javanese account of Aswatama's death by Pasopati aligns with widespread folk beliefs about protecting infants. These include placing a knife in the room where a baby sleeps, or, in some households, positioning a broom upside down as a protective measure.

4. Conclusion

Comic artist Teguh Santosa constructs an expression of Indonesianness in the *Mahabharata* Puppet comic through visual and verbal strategies that foreground Javanese—particularly East Javanese—cultural identity. Visually, Santosa designs the characters through precise, mathematically calculated proportions, while the clothing and accessories distinctly reference East Javanese traditions. For example, the *supit urang* worn by characters such as Bima and Arjuna is integrated directly into their hair rather than rendered as an attached headdress, as is common in other Puppet comics. This approach visually aligns Santosa's characters with East Javanese leather puppetry.

Santosa's construction of identity is also evident in the verbal text. The comic employs both Indonesian and Javanese vocabulary, including terms such as *kangmas* ("older brother"), reinforcing its cultural grounding. This search for identity cannot be separated from the dominant local narratives embedded within the panels, which consistently reflect Javanese interpretations of the *Mahabharata*. The narrative construction further emphasizes this point: Santosa not only depicts Draupadi as monogamous, but also incorporates storylines unique to the Javanese *Mahabharata*, such as the death of Antasena at Krishna's command—an episode absent from the Indian versions of the epic. Antasena himself is a character exclusive to the Javanese tradition. Santosa's visual strategies reflect Hall's (1997) notion that identity is continuously produced through representation.

Through these three forms of construction—visual design, verbal expression, and narrative adaptation—Teguh Santosa effectively presents an Indonesian identity within the *Mahabharata* Puppet comic, shaped by a distinctly Javanese cultural dimension. For future research, it would be productive to compare Santosa's Puppet comic with other reinterpretations of the *Mahabharata* across media such as film, theater, and contemporary literature. Such comparisons may reveal the extent of cultural transformation and adaptation occurring in different artistic and social contexts.

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