



# Javanese Altruism: Suicide as a Symbol of Political Resistance in Modern Javanese Theatre

Wahyu Novianto<sup>1\*</sup>, Guntur<sup>2</sup>, Jamal<sup>3</sup>, Taufik Murtono<sup>4</sup>, Achmad Dayari<sup>5</sup>, Arrauna Bening Aji Kus Indriani<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1,5,6</sup>Department of Theater, Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, 57126, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Postgraduate Program, Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, 57126, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>Academic Support Unit for Documentation and Art Collections, Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, 57126, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup>Department of Visual Communication Design, Faculty of Fine Arts and Design, Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, 57126, Indonesia

## ABSTRACT

In this research, the representation of suicide in modern Javanese theatre is analyzed as a symbol of resistance against repressive power, with an emphasis on the altruistic values typical of Javanese culture. Two theatre scripts, *KUP* (Sego Gurih Theatre Company) and *Dumeh* (Sedhut Senut Theatre Company), are the focus of this study because they feature main characters who choose suicide. A hermeneutic approach within an interpretive framework and content analysis of the texts have been used. This method finds that suicide in both texts is not meant as a personal act of despair, but rather as a political and spiritual statement grounded in the ethics of self-sacrifice in Javanese cosmology. In this context, harmony, obedience, and self-control assume a resistance-oriented connotation. Modern Javanese-language theatre, therefore, is positioned as a space for emancipatory social critique. Thus, suicide is understood not merely as a tragic act, but as a dramatic and political strategy used to uphold justice and restore collective dignity. This research contributes to studying Javanese culture and theatrical practice as a medium for contemplating the relationship between the body, power, and spirituality.

Keywords: suicide; altruism; Javanese culture; modern theatre; political resistance

## ABSTRAK

**Altruisme Jawa: Bunuh Diri sebagai Simbol Perlawanan Politik dalam Teater Modern Berbahasa Jawa.** Dalam penelitian ini, representasi bunuh diri dalam teater modern berbahasa Jawa dianalisis sebagai simbol perlawanan terhadap kekuasaan represif, dengan penekanan pada nilai-nilai altruistik yang khas budaya Jawa. Dua naskah teater, *KUP* (Teater Sego Gurih) dan *Dumeh* (Teater Sedhut Senut), dijadikan fokus kajian karena menampilkan tokoh-tokoh utama yang memilih jalan kematian bunuh diri. Pendekatan hermeneutika dalam kerangka interpretif telah digunakan, bersamaan dengan analisis isi terhadap teks. Melalui metode tersebut, ditemukan bahwa bunuh diri dalam kedua naskah tidak dimaknai sebagai tindakan personal yang dilandasi keputusan, melainkan sebagai pernyataan politis dan spiritual yang berpijak pada etika pengorbanan diri dalam kosmologi Jawa. Dalam konteks ini, nilai-nilai seperti harmoni, kepatuhan, dan pengendalian diri dimaknai secara resistensial. Teater berbahasa Jawa modern, oleh karena itu, diposisikan sebagai ruang kritik sosial yang bersifat emansipatoris. Dengan demikian, bunuh diri dipahami tidak semata sebagai tindakan tragis, tetapi sebagai strategi dramatik dan politis yang digunakan untuk menegakkan keadilan dan memulihkan martabat kolektif. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi bagi kajian budaya Jawa dan praktik teater sebagai medium perenungan atas relasi antara tubuh, kekuasaan, dan spiritualitas.

Kata kunci: bunuh diri; altruistik; budaya Jawa; teater modern; perlawanan politik



## 1. Introduction

Theater is one means of resistance against oppressive systems. In this context, theatre is a social mirror that records cultural dynamics, political conflicts, and social tensions (Gulkhara & Farzaliyeva, 2025); (Abed, 2024)). Satire, criticism, and street theatre performances are forms of expression that directly challenge authority to raise collective consciousness (Ahmad & Alam, 2022); Ristić, 2020; Häisan, 2020; (Lamsal, 2022)). Under authoritarian regimes, theatre has proven effective in critiquing unequal social structures and championing freedom of thought, human rights, and democratic values (Krishnan, 2024; Fatima, 2024). Performances have also been used as a medium to voice injustice, reverse power relations, and strengthen social solidarity (Moser, 2003; Díaz, 2019), and encourage change through collective action and spaces for dialogue (Krishnan, 2024); Häisan, 2020; Díaz, 2019).

The protagonist in theatre is often the dramatic centerpiece, representing the collective voice of the oppressed (Ristić, 2020; Ahmad & Alam, 2022). This role is not only assigned as the leading actor, but also as a symbol of resistance bearing the burden of history and emancipatory aspirations (Gulkhara & Farzaliyeva, 2025). Moral dilemmas and structural pressures are often confronted, making sacrifice the only possible path (Krishnan, 2024; Fatima, 2024). In extreme situations, suicide is chosen as a symbolic expression of courage against injustice (Çobanoğlu, 2022). This narrative of death is used to illustrate the steadfastness of principles and loyalty to the values believed in (Ali et al., 2020). The character who ends his life is not interpreted as a mere victim, but as a martyr who raises collective consciousness through tragedy (Díaz, 2019; Häisan, 2020). Therefore, in modern Javanese-language theatre, the protagonist's death is used as a powerful resolution to aesthetically and politically conflict.

In several modern Javanese-language theatre plays, death is depicted as befalling the protagonist, who fights for human values amidst structural oppression (Çobanoğlu, 2022). Meanwhile, the antagonist, who represents oppressive power, is shown to be increasingly powerful (Rosales, 2021). Repressive actions, even murder, are carried out by the antagonists. In these circumstances, the protagonists ultimately experience death, either by being murdered or by choosing to end their own lives. Suicide is positioned as a last resort to maintain dignity. Therefore, in this context, this act is not interpreted as failure, but as a form of existential courage that makes the protagonist a martyr (Ali et al., 2020).

The phenomenon of suicide by a main character in modern Javanese-language theatre marks a significant difference from Indonesian-language plays. In Indonesian-language scripts, the protagonist is generally given a moral victory, while the antagonist is punished according to society's collective moral expectations (Schibler et al., 2024; Naumovska, 2023). However, these expectations are not fulfilled in the plays *KUP* (Sego Gurih Theatre Company) and *Dumeh* (Sedhut Senut Theatre Company). In both scripts, the protagonist is constructed as the loser.

In *KUP*, the character Mbah Sarju chose to hang himself after realizing that the land where he lived would be cleared for a development project. The loss of community solidarity made him feel marginalized. Meanwhile, in *Dumeh*, Mbah Parto ended his life on the train tracks because he was unable to defend his land rights from pressure from Den Reso. Den Reso forces him to marry Cunong (Mbah Parto's granddaughter), but Mbah Parto rejects this wish. This refusal led Den Reso to intimidate and threaten him. A letter written by Mbah Parto before committing suicide became evidence that led to Den Reso's arrest by the police.

The theme of suicide in drama is nothing new. In Western tradition, suicide has been used as a dramatic resolution in classical Greek tragedy (Sophocles), the Renaissance (Shakespeare), and 20th-century modern theatre (Bennett, 2017). In these works, the motif of suicide is related to guilt, madness, love, or honor (Cohen, 1978; Zamani & Abbasi, 2015). These representations reflect the values and psychological structures of society at the time (Lester, 2022; Lestari, 2024), as well as the drive to seek immortality or emotional outlet (Putri Cempaka Karisma & Fridari, 2020; Randi Pratiwi, 2020).

However, in Javanese theatre scripts, suicide is not interpreted as a personal or individualistic act, but rather as a political expression tied to a collective cultural and spiritual context.

Thus, the questions posed in this study are: How is suicide positioned as a symbol of political resistance in Javanese theatre scripts? Why was this act chosen as a form of resistance? The primary objective of this study is to examine the motivations underlying the protagonists' acts of suicide, while also simultaneously function as a warning to authorities who arbitrarily displace communities from their land. Land is understood as inseparable from dignity; the forcible seizure of land constitutes an assault on one's honor and social existence (Earlene & Djaja 2023). Within Javanese culture, this principle is articulated in the proverb "*sa dumuk batuk, sanyari bumi, ditohi tekaning pati*," which conveys that even a handspan of land is equivalent to one's dignity and must be defended, even at the cost of life itself (Pujiriyani, 2021). Accordingly, the analysis focuses on two principal characters: Mbah Sarju in *KUP* and Mbah Parto in *Dumeh*.

To explore the meaning of suicide more deeply, a hermeneutic approach is used as an interpretive framework. Through hermeneutics, the characters' symbols, actions, and dialogues are analyzed contextually, both socially, historically, and culturally, to uncover hidden horizons of meaning. Hermeneutics, as emphasized by Gadamer, (1975), is an attempt to interpret symbols and a search for understanding of the world in which those symbols exist. With this approach, suicide is construed as a form of political articulation that targets not only the individual level but also touches the collective consciousness of Javanese culture.

## 2. Literature Review

Power in the Javanese cultural context is not only practiced repressively, but is also produced through the formation of behavior, identity, and even the body of society through norms, rituals, and policies (Mai, 2021; Sair et al., 2025; Hamudy & Rifki, 2025). The legitimacy of power is constructed through the intersection of political, religious, and cultural authority, which creates symbolic spaces where the body becomes a field of interpretation for obedience or resistance (Ittihadiyah, 2024). Within this framework, extreme acts such as suicide can be understood as a form of bodily resistance to the domination of power, as explained by Foucault (1978), that the body is the primary locus in the practice of power as well as a field of resistance.

Forms of resistance in Java are often not direct, but are manifested through everyday symbolic and hidden actions, such as illegal land acquisition, minor sabotage, or the construction of alternative narratives within local culture (Maryudi et al., 2016; Dewi, 2025). The concept of "everyday resistance," developed by Scott (1985), highlights the importance of subtle strategies such as silent resistance, whispering, and gossip conducted behind the backs of dominant groups. In this case, resistance can be carried out through symbolic actions as a form of non-violent message delivery.

Durkheim's (1951) classification of suicide provides an essential basis for understanding this act sociologically. One type, altruistic suicide, is described as suicide driven by an individual's high level of integration into a social group. In such situations, the individual is seen as sacrificing I based on collective morality, rather than personal despair: "Altruistic suicide occurs when the individual is too strongly integrated into the social group" (Durkheim, 1951). This type tends to emerge in traditional societies, where communal values and social solidarity are central (Hossen, 2022).

In Javanese society, self-sacrifice can be interpreted as adherence to noble values and shared spirituality. Concepts such as *rukun* (harmony), *manut* (obedience), and *tepa slira* (tolerance) form the primary ethical framework in shaping social life (Koentjaraningrat, 1984; Geertz, 1960; Mulder, 1999). Self-control and harmony are prioritized over individual expression. A fatalistic view is also found to be quite strong, where life is believed to be part of destiny that must be accepted with an attitude of *nrima*

(resignation) (Koentjaraningrat, 1984; Faruk, 2020). De Jong (1976) articulated *nrima ing pandum* as a typical Javanese response to suffering and misfortune.

Locally, the practice of suicide, known as *nglalu* in Javanese culture, is sometimes associated with despair over fate or mystical forces. Nurdianto (2021) and Lelono et al. (2015) state that in areas like Gunung Kidul, suicide is associated with myths such as *pulung gantung* (Suwena, 2016). The fact suggests that the act is influenced by psychological factors and the local community's collective beliefs and value structures.

Studies on modern Javanese-language theatre, particularly those addressing issues of death or suicide, are still relatively limited. Pamungkas (2017) and Novianto (2017) have examined Teater Sego Gurih as a form of folk theatre that presents tragic narratives to reflect human limitations in the face of fate. Widharta (2021), in his study of Teater Sedhut Senut, highlighted the social critique implicit in tragic narratives. However, the motif of suicide as a form of ideological or symbolic expression has not been explicitly discussed in these three studies.

Meanwhile, Novianto (2025) has analyzed the deaths of characters in the plays *Rol*, *Leng*, and *Tuk* by Gapit Theatre Company. In his research, the deaths of characters like Bandrek and Bongkreng are understood as the result of external violence. In contrast, the death of Mbah Kawit is interpreted as a form of ideological choice. However, suicide as an act born of social integration and collective consciousness has not been the focus of discussion. Thus, the personal motives and symbolic meaning of suicide in modern Javanese-language theatre are still rarely highlighted in depth.

In the plays *KUP* (Sego Gurih Theatre Company) and *Dumeh* (Sedhut Senut Theatre Company), the main characters' suicides are not driven by individual despair but by devotion to sacred and noble values. Social integration and ideological pressure are the primary reasons for these decisions. Therefore, this study aims to fill a gap in modern Javanese theatre by examining suicide as a symbol of political resistance born from the characters' spiritual and social awareness.

### 3. Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach within the framework of the constructivist paradigm, also often referred to as the interpretive paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Tisdell & Merriam, 2025). This paradigm views knowledge as a social construct formed through subjective interpretations of reality. Therefore, this approach is deemed relevant for uncovering drama texts and theatrical performances' symbolic meanings and cultural values. To identify and interpret symbolic representations in the works studied, a content analysis method was used. The basic assumption of this method is that every text contains layers of meaning that are not always immediately apparent but can be uncovered through a systematic interpretative process (Krippendorff, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The primary sources used for data collection were: (1) the drama script *KUP* by Wage Daksinaga and (2) the drama script *Dumeh* by Ely Andra Widharta. Textual data were collected through dialogue, narration, and script stage directions. All data focuses on how suicide is represented, what motivates it, and how the narrative of sacrifice is constructed dramatically and symbolically. Including a literature review related to Javanese culture helps strengthen the cultural context of this symbolic reading. Classical literature from Koentjaraningrat, Geertz, and Mulder explains values such as *rukun*, *manut*, *tepo sliro*, and the *nrima* view, which are the basis for Javanese sacrificial acts. Thus, the act of suicide in theatre is not only analyzed from a narrative perspective, but also from the underlying value framework.

Data analysis used a hermeneutic approach, emphasizing a continuous and reflective meaning-making process. The principle of the hermeneutic circle was used as the primary method, continuously linking parts of the text to the whole to uncover hidden or non-explicit meanings (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). This process is non-linear, with repeated rereading of manuscript fragments within the context

of the overall narrative and cultural structure. Through a hermeneutic approach, the characters' symbols, dialogues, and dramatic actions are analyzed in relation to Javanese's society's social, political, and cultural contexts. Interpretation is conducted not only on the textual content, but also on the hidden meanings behind the representations of the characters' actions in facing the pressures of power. The act of suicide is not interpreted as an individualistic personal psychological expression, but rather understood as a representation of social and spiritual values rooted in Javanese society. Therefore, this act can be seen as a form of resistance that is symbolic and loaded with ideological and ethical content.

## 4. Results

The data obtained have been classified into three main thematic categories: motivation for suicide, symbols of political resistance, and self-sacrifice. Each category is presented in tabular form as a basis for interpreting the suicides committed by the characters in the *KUP* and *Dumeh* manuscripts.

### 4.1. Figures Who Committed Suicide

Table 1: Motivation for suicide

No	Script	Figures	Suicide Act	Triggers/Motivations for Suicide	The Core of the Problem
1	<i>KUP</i>	Mbah Sarju	Hanging	The play <i>KUP</i> can be seen as a resistance against dehumanization by those in power. Mbah Sarju commits suicide amidst the threat of burning and eviction of the land ( <i>Buwangan</i> ) he occupies for a development project. The loss of security culminates in the dehumanization of Genjik at the funeral of his mysterious death. The trigger for suicide was the accumulation of pressure from a degrading environment, existential threats, and the moral decline of society, which he called the " <i>jaman kuwalik</i> ".	The threat of eviction and burning indicates the loss of a sense of security regarding humanitarian protection by those in power. Mbah Sarju's criticism focuses on the socio-moral conditions of society where human values have collapsed, and human life is no longer valuable.
2	<i>Dumeh</i>	Mbah Parto	Crashing into a train	The play <i>Dumeh</i> can be interpreted as Mbah Parto's resistance against oppression and the exploitation of human dignity. Den Reso's threat reflects the arrogance of oppressive power. Mbah Parto chose suicide to fight the abuse of structural power in his powerlessness. It was a tragic protest against the " <i>dumeh</i> " system. The trigger for the suicide was a direct threat from Den Reso, who abused his power for personal and political interests.	The threat of land takeover is a result of exploiting the sense of security from powerlessness. Mbah Parto's criticism focuses on " <i>dumeh</i> " as arrogance and abuse of power by individuals in power.

Table 1 shows that the suicides committed by Mbah Sarju and Mbah Parto were both motivated by the pressure of power, exploiting the sense of security stemming from powerlessness, thus eroding human dignity. In the *KUP*, Mbah Sarju chose to hang himself after realizing that his neighborhood would be evicted and filled with terror. Mbah Sarju firmly stated his refusal to embarrass himself (*Dudu watakk, aku kuwi ora adol wirang, ngemis, kabeh panandhang arep ndak lakoni kanthi ikhlas* (Not my character, I will not embarrass myself, begging. I will endure all suffering with sincerity). *Aku ora getun, kabeh kuwi lelakon sing kudu tak lakoni, aku ikhlas. Ning kok ya talah temen, mung arep pada sanake wae kok raiso* (I am not disappointed, all this is the way of life that I have to live. It is truly excessive, only going to gather with my brothers unt'l I can't). The sentence shows the p'inciple's strength in upholding self-esteem and independence despite experiencing deep suffering. Suicide is a refusal to continue living in conditions that degrade human dignity. It is a statement of unwillingness to allow himself to be further degraded by a cruel system. Through suicide, Mbah Sarju takes over the narrative of his existence, refusing to be a passive victim of oppression.



In *Dumeh*, Mbah Parto commits suicide to protect his grandson from the exploitation of power, accompanied by the threat of expulsion. Suicide becomes a final way to assert control over his destiny and refuse to live in a state of stripped dignity as the phrase *timbang awakdewe minggat ora entuk omah mending wis simbah tak pamit lunga* (instead of us leaving and not having tempeh to stay, it's better for grandfather just to leave). Death and the message it leaves behind go beyond personal tragedy. It becomes a performative moral testament. A statement about the critique of the abuse of power and arrogance, and the importance of maintaining dignity and integrity. In a helpless situation, both characters take the path of death as a final defense of the values and life space they believe are essential. Three motivational patterns can be concluded from the data above: (1) the action was carried out as an effort to defend rights and access to land which is considered a symbol of survival; (2) both figures were faced with the pressure of repressive power and did not provide room for negotiation; and (3) the decision to end their lives was driven by the intention of saving the next generation from structural oppression. The act of suicide in this case was not motivated by a personal crisis, but by a collective urge to defend values, land, and dignity that were forcibly taken away.

4.2. Suicide as a Symbol of Political Resistance

Table 2: Symbol of political resistance

No	Script	Figures	Key Dialogue	Notes
1	KUP	Mbah Sarju	<i>Lha ya iki wis tekan mangsane, jamane wis malik kabeh, wong wis ora bisa ngugemi bebeneran.</i> <i>Menungsa nek wis kebuntel bondha uteke ya kaya ngana kuwi. Ilang sipat kamanungsane.</i> <i>Urip sepisan wae kok ora duwe dunung, ora duwe enggon nggo ngeyub “karepe mana mbelani sedulur, ning sing diadepi ora sembarangan. Ora bakal bisa menang”,</i> <i>“Jaman saiki sasat kaya wis ora kena disanak. Tata laire wae sing menungsa, ning jane atine kewan, kepara iseh luwih apik kewan”,</i> <i>“Aku dewe ya njembleng nek ngrasake kahanan saiki. Nyawa menungsa wis ora ana ajine babarblas.”</i> (Well, this is the time. Times have changed. People can no longer hold on to the truth. When people are overwhelmed by wealth, their minds become like that. They lose their humanity. You only live once, without a home, without a shelter. “The intention is to defend your brother, but you’re not just anyone. You can’t win.” “These days, it feels like you were never born. You were born human, but your heart is that of an animal. Even animals are better.” “I myself am shocked by the current situation. Human life has no value at all.”)	Rejection of power that is filled with arbitrariness and does not dehumanize humans.
2	Dumeh	Mbah Parto	<i>... ”oyo koyo ngunu kui den. Kuwalat kowe den”</i> <i>Nek Den Reso mengko kepilih sido dadi Lurah, kowe arep ditembung dadeke bojone. Ning aku ora sepakat. Den Reso terus ngenahi pilihan raenak. Nek aku ora ngentukke kowe dadi bojone, lemah iki arep dija-luk Nong.</i> <i>“Ngapurokno aku nok, simbah wis ra nduwe pilihan... Ning aku tetep ora sepakat nek kowe karo Den Reso.”</i> (“Don’t be like that, Den. You’ll be cursed, Den.” If Den Reso is elected village head, he’ll propose you as his wife. But I won’t agree. Den Reso always makes unpleasant choices. Nong will take this land if I don’t let you be his wife. “I’m sorry, Nok, I have no choice. But I still won’t let you be with Den Reso.”)	Rejection of exploitative at-titudes in power relations that eliminate choices for the party that is weak in power.

In the dialogue excerpt in Table 2, it is apparent that Mbah Sarju and Mbah Parto have a principle of resistance against arbitrary power that dehumanizes humans and the exploitative attitude of the strong towards the weak in power relations. It is critical to underline this attitude of life to understand the context surrounding the characters' actions in responding to reality. The act of suicide was chosen not as an escape from personal suffering, but as a form of resistance against the domination of power that eliminates human dignity and exploits the weak in power relations. Suicide is carried out as an affirmation of choosing one's own way of death rather than passively waiting to be discarded or destroyed by external forces. An act to restore dignity, tragically powerless before the arbitrariness of power. This act can be defined as a final, silent protest against a world that strips everything from him. The structural pressure experienced by the characters is shown through the threat of eviction (*KUP*) and the political pressure of land acquisition through arranged marriage contracts (*Dumeh*).

Mbah Sarju's dialogue, which states that human life is no longer meaningful when faced with the arbitrary power of power, as well as political pressure in the form of contract threats against Mbah Parto, shows that the characters are in a situation without options, trapped in a system that does not provide space to maintain a dignified life. The act of suicide in this context is interpreted as a collective symbol that cannot be separated from the social reality and oppressive power structures that form the heavy burden of marginalization and systemic dehumanization. In a situation of powerlessness, when access to power is stripped, suicide becomes the only way to reassert control over one's destiny and refuse to live in a condition stripped of human dignity. By ending their lives, they make their actions a sharp critique of the abuse of power and arrogance that tramples on human dignity. Their deaths can be interpreted as a silent protest—a firm statement of stance against an oppressive and exploitative system. The final form of passive resistance is to refuse to participate in a system that demeans human dignity.

From the data in Table 2, three main points can be identified: (1) suicide is positioned as a collective tragedy, not a personal decision based solely on despair and (2) repressive structural conditions have created a situation without choice and (3) the loss of a sense of security, pushing the character to make death a form of final defense to choose his own path of death rather than being discarded by a social system filled with injustice. Thus, it shows that the act of suicide not only depicts the suffering of the character, but also presents a sharp political statement on social inequality, as well as questioning the legitimacy of power that has ignored humanity.

#### 4.3. Suicide as a Form of Self-Sacrifice

Table 3: Self-sacrifice

No	Script	Figures	Key Dialogue	Notes
1	<i>KUP</i>	Mbah Sarju	<i>"wong ngalah kuwi jare ora kalah, duwur wekasane E... mbok menawa ana sing welas, wong kepiye wae Genjik kuwi ya menungsa, dudu kewan ala, sing kaya ngapa ya jalma menungsa, muga-muga iseh kesisa rasa kamanungsane ing atine wong wong kae.</i> (People say that giving in doesn't mean losing. Eh, perhaps some have compassion. After all, Genjik is human, not an evil animal. What's the point of being human? Hopefully, there's still some humanity left in those people's hearts.) <i>"Pada elinga urip mung sedela, mula pada tumindake sing becik marang sak pada-pada... Gusti ora sare."</i> (Remember that life is short, so do good to others. God never sleeps.)	A message to always respect humanity          Spiritually surrender and believe that God will uphold justice.
2	<i>Dumeh</i>	Mbah Parto	<i>"Timbang awakedewe minggat ora etuk omah, mending wis simbah tak pamit lunga wae... Simbah pasrah wae. Aku ora rep melu urusan bab lemah po papan panggonan kui"</i> (Instead of us leaving without getting a house, it's better if I say goodbye and go. I give up. I won't get involved in land or home matters.)	The decision to end suffering and escape from a conflict that is not only unresolvable but also disrespects human dignity.

*"Aku wis tua cen ora wayahe neh urip ora kaje ngene ki."*

(I am indeed old, it is no longer time for me to live a life that is not appreciated)

*"Eling yo Nong, sesuk nek kowe sukses ojo pisan pisan dadi wong dumeh. Simbah pamit lunga sik."*

(Remember, Nong, tomorrow when you are successful, don't ever be an arbitrary person. I'll take my leave now.)

Refusal to live in degrading conditions, be forced to submit to oppressive power, or sacrifice one's principles.

Moral messages to grandchildren are a form of ethical warning and sacrifice for future generations.

Based on the data in Table 3, the dialogue spoken before his death demonstrates a full awareness of the meaning and consequences of his actions. In the *KUP*, Mbah Sarju conveys ethical and spiritual reflections, affirming that opportunities to respect humanity must be maintained and that justice remains in God's hands even when worldly life seems unfair. His words demonstrate acceptance of fate and a form of moral fortitude in the face of the inequalities he faces. Meanwhile, in *Dumeh*, Mbah Parto's decision to end his life is conveyed in the form of a testamentary message to his grandson. His rejection of a life that dehumanizes humans, his resistance to coercion and exploitation, and his rejection of "*dumeh*" (arrogant and arbitrary) attitudes are a form of hope that future generations will not repeat the mistakes of oppressive power. This attitude demonstrates that choosing death is not a form of escape, but rather an ethical responsibility to uphold family values and dignity.

Thematically, three patterns of meaning can be recognized from the act of suicide as a form of sacrifice: (1) spiritual surrender to divine will, as reflected in the expression "*Gusti ora sare* (God never sleeps)" and in line with the concept of *nrima ing pandum* in Javanese culture, namely accepting fate as part of the cosmic order that must be respected (Koentjaraningrat, 1984; De Jong, 1976), (2) sacrifice for social protection, which is aimed not at saving oneself, but to provide a way for others, in this case, grandchildren or family, to avoid the same structural suffering, (3) loyalty to collective moral values, where suicide becomes the last way to uphold the social principles believed in, as explained by Durkheim (1951) in the concept of altruistic suicide, namely actions carried out to maintain the honor and integrity of the group.

The visual elements in the setting outlined in the script reinforce this meaning. In the final scene of *KUP*, Mbah Sarju's body is depicted in dim lighting with soft prayers playing in the background, creating a transcendental atmosphere emphasizing the spirituality of sacrifice. In *Dumeh*, Mbah Parto's farewell is depicted with slow motion and a symbolic stage lock, illustrating the inner breadth of accepting death as a form of loyalty to the principles of life. Thus, Table 3 shows that suicide can be read as a political symbol and a representation of self-sacrifice rooted in the Javanese ethos of harmony, social responsibility, and respect for the collective moral order (Mulder, 1999; Faruk, 2020). Suicide is a deliberate act of resistance to maintain ethical integrity and protect human dignity from prolonged oppression.

## 5. Discussions

Based on a hermeneutic approach within the interpretive paradigm, taking into account the socio-political context surrounding both characters, the suicides committed by Mbah Sarju (*KUP*) and Mbah Parto (*Dumeh*) cannot be understood as mere expressions of individual despair. Rather, suicide here is a form of symbolic resistance against the hegemonic power that oppresses and robs them of their dignity (Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). These texts not only convey stories but also become fields of cultural and political interpretation. The dialectic between the world of the text and the social context in which it originates shapes the meaning of the characters' actions (Gadamer, 1975); Geertz, 1960). The findings of this study, analyzed through the principle of the hermeneutic circle, reveal three main patterns: resistance to external power, political symbolization, and self-sacrifice as a guardian of social harmony (Durkheim, 1951; Hossen, 2022; Mulder, 1999)



The main character's suicide is not understood as a form of personal despair, but rather as a form of spiritual resistance based on the noble values of Javanese culture (Nurdiyanto & Subandi, 2021). In the *KUP* narrative, Mbah Sarju's suicide is depicted after pressure from the state through a development project threatens the land he has long occupied. The decision to end his life can be read as a rejection of the dehumanization carried out by the system of power (Nisa, Farisy, Jannah, & Mas'odi, 2025). Meanwhile, in *Dumeh*, Mbah Parto chooses to commit suicide on the train tracks after being unable to save his family's honor and inherited land from the domination of Den Reso. This act is interpreted as self-sacrifice aimed at maintaining dignity and ethical values.

In Javanese culture, death is not simply the end of life, but also signifies a transition to holiness or release from worldly suffering (Haryono, 2016; Faishal, 2022). Therefore, the sacrifices made by the characters in both texts have been placed within a cosmological framework, where suffering is experienced as part of inner practice, and death is seen as a path to the restoration of collective honor (Cahyono, 2019). The act of suicide, therefore, not only represents individual destruction but also serves as a dramatic device to voice resistance against structural inequality. In modern Javanese-language theatre, this act functions as a symbol that simultaneously combines aesthetic, ethical, and political dimensions (Maharani, 2007).

Conceptually, the suicides in both plays are not passive endings, but relatively active and ideological dramatic strategies. Mbah Sarju and Mbah Parto demonstrate a rejection of life without respect for humanity. Through Mbah Sarju's sentence, which rejects *adol wirang* (shaming oneself), and Mbah Parto's sentence, "*Ora wayahe neh urip ora kajen ngene iki*" (it's no longer time for me to live a life without respect), both affirm that death is better than living without honor as a human being—the universal value of human dignity as the main driving force of their actions. Suicide is not merely the result of psychological pressure, but is based on a spirit of sacrifice that is spiritual and social. Within Durkheim's (1951) framework, this act reflects altruistic suicide, namely, self-sacrifice driven by collective consciousness and moral values greater than personal interests. The resistance is symbolic, political, and spiritual, indicating that the characters' bodies become the final field of resistance against the hegemonic order that closes off all possibilities for a dignified life. For both, suicide becomes a form of control that remains when other access to power over their security as human beings has been stripped away.

The characters' motivations for consciously choosing death are closely linked to oppressive structural forces. The lack of choice makes the body the sole medium of resistance. Mbah Sarju and Mbah Parto both risk their lives to defend their homes, a fundamental symbol of humanization, which in Javanese culture holds not only economic value but also sacred significance as ancestral heritage and a symbol of the cosmic connection between humans, nature, and God (Koentjaraningrat, 1984; Mulder, 1999). In local mythologies such as the cult of Dewi Sri, land is the guarantor of balance in life. Thus, the loss of land is understood as a loss of dignity and cosmic balance (Suwondo, 1998).

The author's socio-cultural background also enriches interpretations of the characters' actions. Wage Daksinaga wrote *KUP* in the social context of Gunung Kidul, an area known for its suicide phenomenon associated with the myth of *pulung gantung* and high life pressures (Hadi & Romadhani, 2020). Suicide in this context is not interpreted as defeat, but as a form of nobility. Conversely, Ely Andra Widharta wrote *Dumeh* in the setting of Yogyakarta, steeped in feudal heritage. Mbah Parto's suicide reflects resistance to the *priyayi*-modern social system that still maintains unequal power relations (Suharso & Wasino, 2017). Through the characters of Mbah Sarju and Mbah Parto, both Wage and Ely address urban audiences by suggesting that under the pressures of modernism and capitalism, forces that continually displace communities from their land, resistance ultimately becomes embodied, as the body emerges as the last remaining medium through which refusal can be articulated when all other avenues of negotiation have been exhausted.

Compared with previous research (Pamungkas, 2017; Novianto, 2017; Widharta, 2021), this study offers a new interpretation: suicide in modern Javanese theatre is not the result of cultural fatalism, but

rather a form of heroism. Mbah Sarju and Mbah Parto do not run from their problems, but instead choose to die to save their descendants from disgrace, defend their land, and maintain the social integrity they believe to be noble. In this sense, their actions are altruistic (Durkheim, 1951), reflecting Javanese collective and spiritual values such as *nrima*, *tepa slira*, and *rela kurban* (Geertz, 1960; Mulder, 1999).

Javanese culture, as explained by Koentjaraningrat (1984) and Geertz (1960), tends to avoid confrontation. Therefore, forms of resistance are often carried out covertly, a symbolic tactic that is not frontal but still contains the intention of resistance (Hanafi, 2014). Suicide in this context is an extreme form of “resisting silence,” a practice of everyday resistance as proposed by Scott (1985).

Suicide also has a strong spiritual dimension. Sayings such as “*Gusti Allah ora sare*” demonstrate the belief that divine justice will be brought about through the *cakra manggilingan*, a twist of fate that will reverse social inequality (Suwena, 2016; Mulder, 1999). In *Dumeh*, after Mbah Parto’s death, Den Reso is ultimately arrested by the authorities as a symbol of the reversal of power. Thus, the death of a figure becomes a catalyst for social change, not simply a personal tragedy (Douglas, 1966).

The theoretical implications of these findings broaden our understanding of the function of Javanese-language theatre as a medium of cultural expression and a tool for social critique. Theatre does not merely provide entertainment, but constructs alternative narratives against the dominance of power and injustice (Geertz, 1960; Novianto, 2025). In the representation of its characters, theatrical performances open up a space for reflection on power relations, inequality, and efforts to maintain collective values through symbolic and spiritual means. Thus, the suicide depicted in *KUP* and *Dumeh* can be read as the culmination of the subject’s awareness of structural and spiritual inequality. The choice to die becomes a final form of courage that strengthens the social order and constructs a narrative of resistance to hegemonic power. Within the framework of Javanese culture, this kind of death is an active act, not an escape, but a sacrifice fraught with political, moral, and spiritual meaning.

## 6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that suicide in the context of Javanese culture, as depicted in the performances *KUP* by Wage Daksinaga and *Dumeh* by Ely Andra Widharta, cannot be understood narrowly as an expression of despair (fatalistic suicide). Instead, these acts represent a form of altruistic suicide, namely self-sacrifice rooted in the social, spiritual, and political values of Javanese society. The distinct socio-geographical backgrounds of the two playwrights (Wage Daksinaga from Gunung Kidul and Ely Andra Widharta from the city of Yogyakarta) carry a symbolic resonance in relation to hegemonic power. Their works suggest that capitalism, which has displaced community lands in both rural and urban contexts, generates forms of extreme resistance aimed at safeguarding dignity and preserving the cosmic order regarded as sacred within Javanese culture.

The characters’ bodies in the performance serve as the “final interpretive space” when all channels of social negotiation are closed. In this context, death becomes a political act that speaks to collective suffering and taps into the power of the Supreme Being as a form of hope for social change. Belief in the cycle of the *cakra manggilingan* forms the cosmological basis for this act, making suicide a form of spiritual awareness and social responsibility to uphold honor, family solidarity, and world balance.

The interpretive approach allows theatrical texts to be read as fields of cultural interpretation, not merely narrative, political, and ideological. This research broadens the understanding of Javanese-language theatre as a space for emancipatory social critique, where local symbols such as “land,” “political contract,” or “*pulung*” become counter-narratives to oppressive systems of power. Suicide, in this case, is a distinctive symbolic resistance strategy, not directly confrontational, but possessing high moral and spiritual power.

The limitations of this study lie in the data, which only covered two scripts and their performances. Therefore, generalizations about Javanese theatre should be approached with caution. Furthermore,

the hermeneutical approach tends to be subjective and does not yet involve audience reception as a crucial actor in the symbolic meaning-making process. Further research using a combined hermeneutical and ethnographic approach is recommended to explore the dimensions of audience reception and the broader socio-cultural context. Such studies will significantly contribute to understanding how theatrical performances represent reality and shape collective consciousness and practices of resistance in contemporary Javanese society.

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