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The Meaning Of Freedom And Death In The Poetry Book "Kertas Basah" By Dea Anugrah

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi makna kebebasan dan kematian dalam buku puisi *Kertas Basah* karya Dea Anugrah. Puisi sebagai bentuk sastra yang padat dan simbolik sering menjadi medium untuk mengekspresikan krisis eksistensial dan ketegangan sosial-politik. Dalam *Kertas Basah*, kebebasan digambarkan sebagai kondisi yang rapuh dan terkungkung, sementara kematian muncul sebagai motif yang merefleksikan keputusasaan, perlawanan, dan pencarian otonomi. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan teknik pembacaan dekat (close reading). Analisis dilakukan melalui pendekatan struktural dan semiotik, khususnya teori semiotika puisi Michael Riffaterre serta perspektif eksistensialisme Jean-Paul Sartre dan Martin Heidegger. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kebebasan dan kematian tidak diposisikan sebagai tema yang terpisah, melainkan saling berkaitan, di mana kematian sering dimaknai sebagai bentuk kebebasan terakhir ketika tekanan sosial, psikologis, dan politis tidak lagi tertahankan. Penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memperkaya kajian sastra Indonesia kontemporer, khususnya dalam memahami suara puitik dan kritik eksistensial Dea Anugrah.

Kata Kunci: Puisi, Kebebasan, Kematian, Eksistensialisme, Semiotika, Dea Anugrah

ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of freedom and death in Dea Anugrah's poetry book Kertas Basah. Poetry, as a condensed and symbolic literary form, often becomes a medium for expressing existential crises and socio-political tensions. In Kertas Basah, freedom appears as a fragile and constrained condition, while death emerges as a recurring motif that reflects despair, resistance, and the search for autonomy. Using a descriptive qualitative method and close reading technique, this research analyzes selected poems through structural and semiotic approaches, particularly Michael Riffaterre's theory of poetic semiotics and existentialist perspectives by Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger. The findings show that freedom and death are not presented as separate themes but as interconnected concepts, where death is often implied as the last form of freedom when social, psychological, and political constraints become unbearable. This study contributes to the discussion of contemporary Indonesian poetry by highlighting Dea Anugrah's poetic voice and his critique of modern existential conditions.

Keywords: poetry, freedom, death, existentialism, semiotics, Dea Anugrah

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INTRODUCTION

Since thousands of years ago, humans have developed various cultures through the process of art creations or cultural products. Cultural products are physical forms such as artifacts, inscriptions, books, and traditional clothing, also intangible entertainment such as music, dance, paint, and poetry.

Among all these cultural products, poetry plays a major role in the world through the realization of expressions of all natural, social, and historical phenomena that are rich in meaning.

As a literary expression, poetry contains meaning that is conveyed symbolically and metaphorically, resulting in a fusion that is referred as a work of art. Poetry serves as a means of intergenerational communication by articulating the intricacies of existence, the human condition, and its representation through language, adeptly encapsulating the multifaceted dimensions of each (Wajed, Z., & Saghar, E. 2023. P. 21). Poetry represents about human existence, one of the many important discussions that raises the theme of human existence and has an evocative dimension to be explored more deeply are freedom and death.

Poetry has been used as a universal medium to share thoughts and emotional expressions on big themes like freedom and death in a very broad scope. In the context of Indonesian poems, we can identify the difference between the themes of freedom and death in poems by poets in the earlier era when compared to similar themes written by poets in today's era. For example, we can read a poem by the pioneer of the '45 generation of poets, Chairil Anwar, who explored the meaning of freedom and death through his poem entitled "Merdeka". In this poem, Chairil seems to state that oaths and love are the two main factors that hold him back from achieving freedom, which results in the idea of death as a vehicle to deliver humans to the final meaning of freedom sticking out in the last stanza of this poem.
'Ah! Jiwa yang menggapai-gapai Mengapa kalau beranjak dari sini Kucoba dalam mati.'

In the context of British poems, we can take an example from John Donne, one of the most valuable and greatest poets of the English language. In Donne's poetry, death is represented in a multitude of ways: as a physical event, a spiritual transformation, and an emotional response (Gardner, 1973). In "Death, Be Not Proud," Donne personifies death as a powerful but ultimately powerless figure, declaring that "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so" (Saksono, Wardhono, Salikin, 2023).

However, Dea Anugrah's poems contained in the book "Kertas Basah," illustrates the crisis of freedom that hits individual and ultimately manifests in the act of searching for the existence of freedom outside of life, namely death by suicide. While Chairil Anwar's poem "Merdeka" suggests that internal factors are the ones that hold him back from freedom which then make the author think about death as an alternate way to achieve freedom, and while John Donne's poem "Death, Be Not Proud" reducing the meaning of death, which for many people is grand and sacred, in the poem "Reportase," Dea states that someone who commits suicide is said to no longer need to think about cleanliness and tidiness and the judgment of others, which further highlights someone who suffers freedomlessness from external factors.

The "Kertas Basah" book can be viewed as both a report on a socio-political situation and a philosophical meditation on life, autonomy and mortality. This research therefore focuses on how

freedom and death are constructed and represented in the poem. This research aims to uncover the layered meanings within the poem by analysing the two key themes of freedom and death, and to contribute to a deeper understanding of Dea Anugrah's poetic voice and his relevance within contemporary Indonesian literature.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs descriptive qualitative method, focusing on close reading as the primary method. The analysis will be guided by textual interpretation, considering elements such as imagery, metaphor, diction, and narrative voice. The method used in collecting data is the literature study method, which involves the process of reading, listening to, and summarizing various books, journals, and articles needed for the research.

This study uses a random sampling technique to obtain data, while data collection is carried out in a random/systematic manner (Nugroho, 2021). The approach will be thematic, supported by Structural Poetry & Riffaterre's Semiotical theories in literary criticism, especially those related to symbolism, existential themes, and modern poetry. Secondary sources, such as previous critiques of Anugrah's work and relevant theoretical texts, will support the analysis when needed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the beginning, *Kertas Basah* reveals Dea Anugrah's deep concern for the most fundamental conditions of human existence: vulnerability, the quest for freedom, and the awareness of mortality. The freedom depicted in her poems does not appear as an absolute right or an ideal concept easily attainable; it is always fragile, easily displaced, and shaped by the complex interplay of social, psychological, and existential pressures. Each poem reflects the inner world of the poet-character who continuously struggles between the desire for liberation and the constraining realities of life, where freedom is not merely a philosophical notion but an experience that is continuously negotiated and deeply felt. This process, both internally and externally, forms the core of the human experience depicted by Anugrah.

On the other hand, death emerges as an inseparable theme from freedom. Unlike common discourse that positions death merely as the end of life, Anugrah renders it as a symbol of liberation, reflection, and ultimate autonomy. Death functions as a means to question limitations, challenge norms, and explore the ultimate boundaries of human freedom. In this context, death is not merely a tragedy or loss; it is an existential declaration, a medium through which humans can seize control over their lives when all other paths to freedom are blocked. The dialectic between freedom and death forms the central axis for understanding the poems in *Kertas Basah*, where every movement of language, symbol, and metaphor is directed to reveal their interconnection.

Existentialist thought, particularly that of Sartre and Heidegger, offers a useful lens for analyzing this work. Sartre asserts that humans are "condemned to be free," meaning freedom always comes with responsibilities and consequences that cannot be avoided. In Anugrah's poems, this is reflected in the poet-character's awareness of the choices they must make, the burdens they bear, and the impossibility of escaping socially or psychologically limiting conditions. The freedom they live is always accompanied by risks, rejection, and tangible existential consequences. Heidegger emphasizes that awareness of mortality is central to existential experience, so the consciousness of death allows individuals to evaluate life and freedom more authentically. In *Kertas Basah*, this awareness provokes deep reflection, where death becomes not just an end but a tool to understand the meaning of life with full autonomy over oneself.

Symbolism is a crucial medium that Anugrah uses to convey the relationship between freedom and death. The motif of water recurs repeatedly, symbolizing mortality, change, and the fluidity of human existence. Water emphasizes that life is always in motion, and freedom, like water, is fragile and easily displaced. Similarly, the wet paper, both the title and a central symbol, underscores the fragility of human expression and the vulnerability of freedom to external pressures. Writing on wet paper can easily smudge, fade, or become unreadable, reflecting humanity's struggle to express itself amid uncertainty.

Anugrah further incorporates shadows, fleeting light, stagnation, and decay as symbols enriching the meaning. Shadows depict the darker sides of human consciousness, anxiety, and fear that restrict freedom. Fleeting light signifies moments of temporary freedom, while stagnation and decay emphasize human finitude and limitations. Through these symbols, readers are invited to recognize that freedom cannot be separated from death and existential limitations; both mutually shape the meaning and experience of being human.

Anugrah's poems emphasize that freedom is often understood through limitation, and death gains meaning as the potential for ultimate liberation. This dialectic creates strong existential tension: the poet-character is always caught between the aspiration to be free and the constraining realities, between a life full of choices and death as the final path to autonomy. Psychologically, anxiety, fear, and awareness of others' judgment add layers of internal conflict, where freedom is desired but obstructed, and death becomes a reflective symbol to understand how humans face internal and external pressures.

Socially, *Kertas Basah* demonstrates how norms, expectations, and social structures limit individual freedom. Humans exist within networks of social pressures that shape identity, restrict expression, and demand conformity to collective standards. In this context, death becomes a symbol of resistance to social constraints, marking a point where individuals assert autonomy when conventional avenues to freedom are unavailable.

Language, style, and poetic structure further reinforce these themes. Repetition, parallelism, visual imagery, and complex metaphors build an intense emotional experience for readers. Every word and

symbol forms layers of meaning, compelling readers to interpret the relationship between freedom and death, feel the poet-character's inner tension, and understand human existential experience.

One of the most striking strengths is the use of symbolism and metaphor to convey complex meaning. Anugrah rarely states themes directly; she employs objects, imagery, and natural phenomena as mediums to express existential tension, internal conflict, and social critique. Each symbol carries layered meanings that interconnect, forming a network of relations that enrich the reading experience and interpretation.

The motif of water serves as a symbol of transition, fluidity, and existential uncertainty. Water represents not only physical life but also freedom that is temporary and easily displaced. Flowing water on wet paper signifies how human expression is vulnerable to external influences. Its constant movement reflects life's dynamics, where every action and choice is subject to inevitable change. Furthermore, water symbolizes mortality and transience, reminding that true freedom is never static.

The wet paper itself is the primary metaphor encapsulating the overarching theme. Words upon it are easily blurred, faded, or lost, emphasizing that expressions of freedom can be erased by social pressures, others' judgments, or psychological conditions. This symbol reminds us that freedom is not an absolute right but a condition that must be continuously maintained, fought for, and reflected upon. The fragility of wet paper mirrors human fragility in facing the world, where every decision has consequences and every expression is vulnerable.

Light and shadow add duality and existential tension. Fleeting light emerges as moments of freedom and hope, while shadows signify limitations, anxiety, and internal obstacles. Light piercing through shadow represents temporary freedom, highlighting the contrast between hope and reality. Shadows are not merely darkness but psychological symbols of fear and socially imposed norms. The interaction of light and shadow creates a symbolic rhythm, demonstrating how freedom emerges amidst constraints, and how death becomes a means to confront or assert boundaries.

Stagnation and decay depict existential limitation and mortality. Stagnation signifies an inability to move or escape constraining conditions, while decay reflects the finitude of life alongside processes of transformation. In Anugrah's poetry, stagnation and decay remind us of the limitations to face and the opportunities for reflection and discovery of meaning.

Beyond natural symbols, everyday objects also carry symbolic value. Others' judgments, cleanliness, tidiness, and mundane actions mirror social pressures that limit freedom. Anugrah uses these to show how freedom is often compromised by seemingly trivial social norms yet has deep psychological effects. Death appears as a symbolic protest, a means to assert autonomy when other avenues of expression are restricted.

Semiotic analysis reveals that these symbols are interconnected, forming a network of meaning. Water flows not only over wet paper but also creates shadows, reflects light, and interacts with stagnation

or decay. Wet paper, light, shadow, stagnation, decay, and everyday objects form mutually reinforcing patterns, guiding readers to interpret freedom and death simultaneously.

These symbols also evoke an emotional dimension. Readers experience flowing water, paper that is soft yet easily torn, fleeting light, menacing shadows, the stasis that restrains, and the decay that brings loss. This sensorial experience strengthens the theme and allows readers to feel the poet-character's psychological and existential tension.

Moreover, symbolism facilitates subtle social critique and philosophical reflection. Water flowing over wet paper can be interpreted as a critique of social conditions suppressing expression. Light and shadow depict how freedom is influenced by social pressures, while stagnation and decay reflect consequences of structural and psychological limitations. Death, as a reflective symbol, is not only existential but also a protest against social injustice, restrictive norms, and psychological pressures.

The psychological dimension is key to understanding the interplay of freedom and death. Anugrah's poems portray fragile, tense inner states, constantly facing conflict between aspirations for liberation and constraining realities. This dimension touches both the poet-character's subjective experience and the universal existential condition: how individuals confront fear, anxiety, social pressure, and responsibility for their freedom.

Anxiety arises as a natural consequence of the "condemned" freedom. To be free means to be responsible, and responsibility always brings burden. The poet-character experiences psychological pressure when determining their own path amid social norms, judgment, and existential uncertainty. Imagery of rushing water on wet paper, shadows covering light, and damp sheets serve as metaphors for fragile, precarious psychological states, always on the edge of uncertainty.

Internal fear manifests as concern over others' judgment, social norms, or failure to express oneself. Shadows, fleeting light, and flowing water symbolize the fear looming over every step and choice, reflecting the collective human experience of living in a society full of rules, expectations, and evaluation. Death emerges as a psychological symbol of liberation, a space for reflection, and a declaration of autonomy when other avenues to freedom are blocked.

The psychological dimension also emphasizes internalized social pressures: guilt, shame, or the obligation to conform forms complex inner conflict, where freedom is always risky, and death arises as an alternative to assert control when other paths fail. A sense of isolation emerges: the poet-character exists in a narrow inner space, their inner voice becomes a companion, silence turns into a medium of self-interrogation, and existential questions arise relentlessly: can freedom be achieved? Is life meaningful if one is always trapped by social pressures? Is death the ultimate path to autonomy?

Identity conflict emerges: the individual who wishes to be free clashes with the identity expected by society, family, or peers. This conflict creates deep psychological tension, where symbols such as shadow, light, and water reflect the struggle of identity and internal conflict. Death functions as a

psychological mechanism to manage inner tension, not merely biological end, but a means to assert control, reflection, and self-release.

The psychological dimension is also linked to existential responsibility: to be free means to choose, and choosing entails responsibility. Every choice carries psychological, social, and existential consequences. Death is not an escape but a symbol of full awareness of responsibility. Understanding death provides a new perspective on life, choices, and freedom, allowing individuals to evaluate their interaction with the world and negotiate their existence.

Social pressure interacts with internal fear, creating complex inner conflict. Poetry becomes a medium to express this tension, where symbols of water, wet paper, light, shadow, stagnation, and decay intensify the reader's psychological experience. Each symbol operates on aesthetic, emotional, and psychological levels, illustrating how internal and external pressures shape perceptions of freedom and death.

Freedom and death in *Kertas Basah* are inseparable. They form a dynamic inner interplay, where internal pressures provoke existential reflection, and death becomes a symbol of psychological liberation. Anugrah's poetry offers a profound depiction of the human condition: freedom intersects with anxiety, fear, responsibility, and awareness of mortality, making it a work that is not only aesthetic but also a deep philosophical and social meditation.

CONCLUSION

Kertas Basah by Dea Anugrah presents a profound exploration of freedom and death as interconnected human experiences. Freedom is portrayed as fragile, dynamic, and constantly negotiated, influenced by psychological, social, and existential pressures. Anugrah's poems reveal that freedom is not an absolute right, but an experience achieved through reflection, awareness, and the individual's struggle to face constraining realities.

Death emerges not merely as a biological end but as a symbol of reflection, liberation, and affirmation of autonomy. The relationship between freedom and death creates an existential dialectic: freedom is often understood through awareness of limitations and mortality, while death provides a perspective to assert control over life and find authentic meaning in each choice.

Symbolism serves as a crucial medium for conveying this meaning. Water, wet paper, light, shadow, stagnation, and decay enhance the psychological and social experiences of the poetic persona. Water represents fluidity and mortality, wet paper reflects the vulnerability of human expression, light and shadow emphasize moments of freedom and limitation, while stagnation and decay remind readers of existential constraints. Through these symbols, readers are invited to understand inner conflict, social pressures, and the awareness of existential responsibility.

Overall, *Kertas Basah* affirms that freedom and death are inseparable aspects of the human experience. Together, they form a complex dynamic that demands reflection and individual awareness. The work not only provides an aesthetic experience through language and symbolism but also offers profound philosophical, psychological, and social reflections, encouraging readers to contemplate the meaning of life, understand limitations, and evaluate each choice with full awareness of existential responsibility.

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