

# Covid-19 Pandemic in Indonesian Indigenous Literary Works: Promising Cultures to Develop into a Before and After

Antonius Herujiyanto  
[ant\\_heru@usd.ac.id](mailto:ant_heru@usd.ac.id)

Universitas Sanata Dharma Yogyakarta – Indonesia

**Abstract.** This study is to deal with the covid-19 pandemic as seen in Indonesian indigenous literary works, highlighting their roles in the lives and cultures of the country. Not only is it to highlight the genres of the works, but it is also to reveal the deeper meaning of the disease seeping into the very works. The data used are selected from those works such as *Dhandanggula*, *Ketoprak*, and *Geguritan* produced during the pandemic in the country (December 2019 - May 2020). Looking into them using Stuart Hall's Cultural Studies (1964) and Herujiyanto's *Wayang and Brechtian Strategy* (2016), it is revealed that the pandemic and literary works in question promise to transform cultures in many uncertain different ways. They might be a makeover of the saying that *l'histoire se répète*; when it takes place, however, it is rarely gentle but promising lives and cultures to develop into a BAA (Before\_and\_After).

**Key words:** Covid-19, literary works, indigenous, Before\_and\_After, *wayang* strategy

## 1 Introduction

It is admitted that the COVID-19 pandemic has, indeed, caught people's attention all around the world including Indonesia. The pandemic is not only deteriorating health and mortality (a health crisis), but there has also been the devastating effects brought about from the no-more masks in the chemist's and/or supermarkets, the international travel restrictions, the sudden bull-to-bear stock market transition and to a lot of uncertainty. The level of such a situation seems to rise and be like a never ending song of misery.

Instead of being panic, fear, hopelessness, it is strongly recommended to do otherwise, preventing for just sitting back, getting worried, watching or waiting. It is a must, therefore, to quickly decide not to let such circumstances dictate the reality. This is precisely the aim of the study: revealing the meaning of such a situation as portrayed in the literary world. Instead of stepping in and stopping to let things happen to them, they make it happen for them. The question of the study can, therefore, be formulated as "What is the deeper meaning of the Covid-19 Pandemic seeping into Indonesian indigenous literary works?"

This is in line with the idea proposed by Gillespie *et al* in their *World Literature: Connecting Nations and Cultures* [1]. Quoting Edward Said, they point out about the persisting continuities of long traditions and that survival is about connections between things. To be more precise, this research is to deal with the nature of the pandemic depicted in Indonesian indigenous literary works, highlighting that the works tend to promise cultures (and, indeed, lives) to develop into such a connection, a before and after.<sup>1</sup>

This study is not only to portray the reality of Indonesian people in facing the pandemic as seen in their literary works, but it is also to describe the public awareness of the disastrous uncertainty of the pandemic. This appears to be a positive and natural response to the so-called another Indonesia's "year of living dangerously." According to Will Daren, the other such discouraging years which have taken place in the country are the [riots and protests](#) after the presidential elections in May 2019, those 1997-1998 epochs of the end of President Suharto's regimes and the beginning of the country's *Reformasi* and a new era of democratic values.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Research Method, Theories and Activities

In order to achieve the goal of this study, the essential steps to take are to gather the data by selecting the Indonesian indigenous literary works such as *Dhandanggula* (one of the 11 Indonesian Javanese *Macapat* songs), *Ketoprak* [a theatrical genre of Indonesian plays featuring actors who may also sing to the accompaniment of the gamelan], and *Geguritan* [Indonesian Javanese verse/poetry] produced and carried on printed and online media from December 2019 - May 2020 in the country.

Having gathered the data obtained by surveying many different libraries and those of the internet, the next step is to provide the primary data of this study with one selected work of each genre. They are "Dhandanggula Corona"<sup>3</sup> of Edi Dharmana and Totok Pamungkas to represent

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<sup>1</sup> In their book, Sheena Gillespie, together with Trezinha Fonseca and Tony Pipolo talk about engaging in colloquium among cultures to comprehend the meaning of community in the multicultural society (2005, pp xxiii-xxiv).

<sup>2</sup> His article "Indonesia and COVID-19: Living Dangerously Once Again" carried on <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/indonesia-and-covid-19-living-dangerously-once-again/>, April 06, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Carried on many different social media esp. *youtube* and printed papers; "Dhandanggula Corona" was sung by Edi Dharmana and Totok Pamungkas [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RjT6zRrfbw>], accessed on 22 April 2020

Macapat, “Pagebluk”<sup>4</sup> of Ketoprak Srawung Bersama (KSB), while Coro Ireng’s “Sekaring Bawana Langgeng”<sup>5</sup> is to represent Geguritan, respectively. The secondary data are those related texts, journals, books including criticism of the earlier works and of those carried on the internet.

The analysis activities are commenced by taking a critical approach involving previewing, highlighting and annotating to look into the very three works. The approach applied is that of Stuart Hall’s Cultural Studies [2] and in the lights of Herujiyanto’s Wayang Strategies [3] and the theories proposed by Tompkins and Simpson [4]. The next thing to do is to find the deeper meaning of the findings.

Admittedly, literary analysis and cultural theorists have been strongly influenced by historical approaches since the 1980s. In the 21st century, however, Cultural Studies influence history, sociology, communications and media. Mentioning New Historicism criticism, Alison Booth *et al.* (2006, pp.1204-1213) point out that, their method, style, and subject matter may be similar: attending to historical context, political commitment, and textual analysis. This study applies, combining both the spirit of American movement with Foucault’s strong view of state domination through discourse, and that of the British school (such as that of Stuart Hall’s Contemporary Cultural Studies) represented by Raymond Williams’ concept of the structures of feeling [5].

### 3. Result and Discussion

The matters highlighted by Booth are similar or rather cotextual with that of Stuart Hall’s Cultural Studies. Both, New Historicism and cultural studies are concerned with historical context, political commitment, and textual analysis. The differences may be pointed out that Booth is strongly influenced by one of Foucault’s views, saying that discourse has been inappropriately treated as the main tool implemented by the state or the government to establish its power to controll, while Hall tends to adopt Raymond William’s concept on the publics’

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<sup>4</sup> “Pagebluk” by Ketoprak Srawung Bersama (KSB), [<https://20.detik.com/e-flash/20200422-200422088/hibur-masyarakat-seniman-ketoprak-solo-bikin-pentas-via-streaming> and <https://dinamikalink.com/2020/04/20/dalam-pageblug-seniman-tradisi-dan-modern-bersatu/> accessed on 20 April 2020]

<sup>5</sup> “Sekaring Bawana Langgeng” is written and read by Coro Ireng [[www.youtube.com/Watch?v=ZZLDb4x8ZN4](http://www.youtube.com/Watch?v=ZZLDb4x8ZN4), accessed on 3 May 2020].

important roles represented by ordinary people, resisting dominant ideology attended by the state.

Without disagreeing with Foucault, however, the deeper meaning of the three works discussed in this study may be depicted in the light of their limited intrinsic aspects followed by their overt meaning. The covert meaning is the outcome of looking into them by implementing Hall's concept. It is only obvious, thus, that the nature of each work is to show their typical intrinsic world, not that of their deeper meaning. Examining that of their intrinsic is to lead to find their surface meaning, while the deeper meaning may be revealed through that of their extrinsic one.

### 3.1 "Dhandanggula Corona"

*Dhandanggula* is one of the 11 genres in Javanese Indonesian *Macapat* song. Besides its rules such as the numbers of lines, the numbers of syllables within one line, and its rhyme, it is created as a kind of poetic song expressing one's beautiful, sweet and hopeful dream. It is also often used to describe the up and down life filled with the upbeat and downbeat mood.

Looking into the ten lines of "Dhandanggula Corona" presented by Prof. Edi Dharmana (ED) and Ki Totok Pamungkas (TP), reminds us of Horatius's *dulce et utile* (entertaining and educating). Not only is the very piece of literary work an expression of their *ketercekaman* (restlessness) of the present situation taking place in the country, but it also depicts the social reality which is instructional.

It is started with its very first line, "*Bebenduking salumahing bumi*" (The whole world pandemic disease--trans. mine), pointing out straight forward the topic of the work, the pandemic. This "before" moment is clarifying and explaining the unacceptable stigma "beating around the bush" style of Indonesian culture.

The "after" actions are represented in lines 6 (*Mula ayo dibrasta*--We shall completely erase and destroy it) and 7 (*Golong ghilik tuhu*-- United are we supposed to be).

The surface (overt) meaning of the last three lines (*Ora usah dho salaman*--No shaking-hands to cut off transmission; *Ojo dolan nang omah iku kang becik*-- Not to go out, stay-at-home instead; *Sregep wijikan asta*--Do frequently wash) talk about the technical things to do. Their deeper meaning is to represent their belief in the saying that actions speak louder than words.

## Dhandanggula Corona

Prof. Edi Dharmana [ED] and Ki Totok Pamungkas [TP]

(Translated by Antonius Herujiyanto)

[ED:]	<i>Bebenduking salumahing bumi</i>	(1) The whole world pandemic disease
	<i>Sumebar wabah virus Corona</i>	(2) With spreading out Coronavirus pandemic
	<i>Covid Sangalas arane</i>	(3) The Covid-19 by name
[TP:]	<i>Tan katon in pandulung</i>	(4) Designed to be invisible
	<i>Nanging tandange nggegirisi</i>	(5) with its disastrous power
[ED:]	<i>Mula ayo dibrasta</i>	(6) We shall completely erase and destroy it
[TP:]	<i>Golong ghilik tuhu</i>	(7) United are we supposed to be
[ED:]	<i>Ora usah dho salaman</i>	(8) No shaking-hands to cut off transmission
	<i>Ojo dolan nang omah iku kang becik</i>	(9) Not to go out, stay-at-home instead
[TE:]	<i>Sregep wijikan asta</i>	(10) Do frequently wash hands with soap

### 3.2 Kethoprak

*Kethoprak* is a theatrical genre of Indonesian plays featuring actors who may also sing to the accompaniment of the gamelan orchestra. It is the modern Javanese stage plays with historical mythological themes [5]. The Kethoprak group from Solo, KBS (Ketoprak Srawung Bersama) with its recent performance named “*Pagebluk* (Black Death).”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <https://20.detik.com/e-flash/20200422-200422088/hibur-masyarakat-seniman-ketoprak-solo-bikin-pentas-via-streaming> and <https://dinamikalink.com/2020/04/20/dalam-pageblug-seniman-tradisi-dan-modern-bersatu/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5i6Rm0m2OM>. (Accessed on April 20, 2020)

The play was written by Winarso and directed by St. Wiyono. The Gamelan orchestra was chaired by Lumbini. Not only has it been staged in their village studio named Banjarsari, but it was also aired through live streaming at 7.00 p. m., on Sunday, April 19, 2020.

“Pagebluk (Black Death)” tells about the struggles of the victims of human rights violation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their condition and the situation faced is similar to that of the 1965 mass murder of the (defunct) Indonesian Communist Party members with their following problems of seeking justice to be given (to the victims and their families).

The situation is filled up with a lot of uncertainty. When the people happen to suffer from the Covid-19 or SARS-CoV-2, they have to be quarantined and isolated in the hospitals. It is as it was in 1965 when the people had to hide in their own homes worrying the soldiers to come, arresting and putting them in a jail and/or even killing them.

The play consists of three acts and its surface meaning is easily followed as it adopted the so-called Javanese tradition of comic performance style. It is similar to that mentioned in Herujiyanto’s *Understanding Indonesian Plays: Wayang and Brechtian Strategy*, saying that the first act consists of three scenes, *Paseban*, *Bedholan*, and *Sabrangan*.<sup>7</sup> During the *Paseban*, the main characters talk about the problems they are to face. It also depicts the setting of the play. This is followed by *Bedolan* and *Sabrangan*, depicting the actions to do. The very Act is, however, still blurr in the sense that the problem to be depicted through the play is not clear yet. The second act, consisting of *Gara-gara* and *Begalan*, is to depict the life problem and conflict ending up with the exploration of life in order to see the meaning of the Covid-19 pandemic in the sense of both spiritually and physically. The final one consists of two scenes, *Perang Brubuh* and *Kedatonan*, dealing with the victory of the good deeds and the expectation of grasping the glory and justice [6].

This is not the same as the so-called French tradition of comic performance style between 1870 and 1910 nearly exactly duplicates the movements, gestures, tics, grimaces, and speech anomalies found in nineteenth-century hysteria; the characteristics of hysteria became a new aesthetics [7].

The deeper meaning of the play might be still difficult to digest by thousands of Indonesian young people watching it online. Most of them were not born yet when the 1965 tragedy took place. It would be different, however, for those who are interested in Indonesian political affairs. There have been many books and papers in a more transparent ways exposing the situation in Indonesia in 1965. The covert meaning of such a satirical play is crystal clear.

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<sup>7</sup> According to Herujiyanto (2017, pp.12-15), the three acts consist of three scenes similar to that of *wayang*, respectively, *Paseban*, *Bedolan* and *Sabrangan*; *Gara-gara* and *Begalan*; *Perang Brubuh* and *Kedatonan*.

They would understand, for example, when people talk about KSB is echoing an article entitled, for example, “Indonesia and Covid-19: Living Dangerously Once Again.” The play is not far different from portraying the reality of Indonesian people in facing the pandemic; they are aware of its disastrous uncertainty is similar to the so-called another Indonesia’s “year of living dangerously.” It is similar to the discouraging years during the riots and protests after the presidential elections in May 2019, those of the 1997-1998 epochs of the end of President Suharto’s regimes and the beginning of the country’s *Reformasi* and a new era of democratic values.

KSB would have, indeed, indirectly invited the audience to recall that such a horrible uncertainty had taken place before with many of the victims have been forgotten. The play, as the director himself said, implicitly reminds him of the suffering political situation taking place 55 years ago in the country. It is a kind of wondering a before and after, portraying the present deteriorating health and mortality as (a health crisis) as reminding the probable wierd paranoia about the past “years of living dangerously.”

### 3.3 Geguritan

Unlike “Dhandanggula Corona”, Coro Ireng’s “Sekaring Bawana Langgeng (The Lasting Fragrance)” is a *Geguritan* (a Javanese poem) narrating the present (May 2020) discouraging atmosphere in Indonesia due to the Covid-19 or SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The two meanings of the very Javanese poem may, indeed, be depicted as the surface and deeper meanings. Its overt or surface meaning may be seen from all the 22 lines, describing that the pandemic has, indeed, taken place in the country with all those thousands of victims (lines 1 up to 11). The calling to end the situation is, however, expressed through lines 12 – 15, followed by proposing the easiest ways to do so (lines 16-22). The deeper meaning of the work may be beautifully revealed by analysing the rich metaphorical title of the *Geguritan*.

The words *Sekaring Bawana Langgeng* depict their many possible meanings. The word *Sekaring* is derived from *sekar*, meaning “flower”. In Javanese, the word also means *kembang* which may be associated with *tembang* or “song.” It may also mean “fragrance.” The word *sekaring* would, therefore, mean “blooming” or “the song of” or “the fragrance of.”

The word *bawana* means “the world”, while *langgeng* is “forever” or “lasting.” The deeper meaning of the *Guritan* “Sekaring Bawana Langgeng (The Lasting Fragrance)” is that life must go on, that the pandemic would not make the end of the world. By looking into the work with its cross cultural translation, it might clarify such findings.

***Sekaring Bawana Langgeng (The Lasting Fragrance)***

Coro Ireng [translated by Antonius Herujiyanto]

- Pirangane sasi wus kalampah* [1] (Months have passed by)
- Walak tan sigra paripurna* [2] (Pandemic with no end)
- Kebangeten .... Kebangeten..!!* [3] (Too much to bear... too cruel to be true)
- Embuh saka endi dumadine kahanan iki* [4] (Not about its unknown origin)
- Pertiwi gonjang-ganjing, jagad saya semrawut* [5] (but suffering mother land, chaotic world)
- Yen wus kadung ngene, njur kepriye* [6] (Too late to question why)
- Kawuningana!!* [7] (Let it be known)
- Wus ewon nyawa muntab saka raga* [8] (thousands victimized souls flying away)
- Apa kudu nambah tumbal* [9] (should be there more to sacrifice)
- Utawa arep dipungkasi* [10] (or the will to end it all)
- Gumantung sadaripun manah* [11] (but up to awakening hearts)
- Gugahen manahira, sentaken jiwana* [12] (Wake your heart, shout at your soul)
- Pungkasi walak iki* [13] (To end the Covid-19 pandemic)
- Pagebluk kang wus dumadi* [14] (The intolerable weird plaque)
- Yen wegah luwih rekasa* [15] (Otherwise more misery will be there)
- Jumenenga ing griya* [16] (Just stay home)
- Jumeneng in griya* [17] (Just work from home)
- Aja tumindak kang siya-siya* [18] (Not other useless efforts)
- Dedonga, mring Kang Maha Kuasa* [19] (Stay close to the Almighty)
- Mugiya enggal waluya* [20] (Recovery be returned)
- Nirmala temah jati, jati temah mulya* [21] (As before and after with ending well)
- Sura Dira Jayaningrat lebur Dening Pangastuti* [22] (Establishing victorious patience and compassion)



## 4. Conclusion

The covid-19 has, indeed, seeped into Indonesian indigenous literary works such as *Dhandanggula*, *Ketoprak* and *Geguritan*. Not only do they portray the reality faced by the people from the uncertainty to health crisis, but they also provide the people with many other different perspectives. As seen in *Dhandanggula* “Corona”, *Ketoprak* “Black Death”, and *Geguritan* “Sekaring Bawana Langgeng”, for example, the meanings of the seeping of SARS-CoV-2 pandemic are that “beating around the bush” is an unacceptable stigma of Indonesian culture, injustice cannot be forgotten, and that life must go on, respectively. Admittedly, the indigenous literary works are pleased to be a makeover of *l’histoire se répète*; and when it takes place, they promise lives and cultures to develop into a BAA (Before\_and\_After).

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