

## Existentialism in Ayu Utami's *Bilangan Fu*: Freedom, Responsibility and the Absurd in Contemporary Indonesian Fiction

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of existentialist philosophy in Ayu Utami's novel *Bilangan Fu* (2008), with particular focus on four interconnected dimensions: the search for existential meaning, individual freedom of choice, moral responsibility for decisions, and the experience of absurdity. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach and close reading as the primary analytical method, the study systematically identifies and interprets textual evidence through the theoretical frameworks of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The findings reveal that Utami constructs a nuanced existentialist landscape in which her characters—particularly the mountaineering protagonist—navigate extreme situations that foreground the tension between human desire for meaning and a world that resists rational totalization. Freedom in the novel is portrayed not as boundless autonomy but as an ethically laden condition intertwined with collective responsibility and self-discipline. The characters' confrontation with the absurd—manifest in paradoxical metaphysical formulations, the critique of modernity, and the irreducibility of subjective experience—reflects Camus's concept of the absurd hero who lives without appeal. This article argues that *Bilangan Fu* constitutes a significant site of philosophical literary engagement within the contemporary Indonesian novel, enriching scholarly discourse on the intersection of existentialism and postcolonial subjectivity. The study contributes to comparative literary studies by situating Indonesian fiction within transnational conversations about human existence, agency, and meaning-making.

*Keywords: existentialism; Bilangan Fu; Ayu Utami; absurdity; freedom*

### INTRODUCTION

The intersection of philosophy and literary narrative has long served as fertile ground for interrogating the human condition. In the global literary tradition, existentialism—with its foundational emphasis on individual freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning in an indifferent universe—has profoundly shaped novelistic form and content from Dostoevsky and Kafka to Sartre and Camus (Flynn, 2006; Solomon, 2004). Yet the reception and creative transformation of existentialist thought within non-Western

literatures remains undertheorized, particularly in the context of Southeast Asian fiction, where the negotiation between Western philosophical paradigms and indigenous cultural frameworks produces distinctive literary imaginaries.

Ayu Utami's *Bilangan Fu* (2008), published as the first volume of the *Bilangan Fu* series, represents a landmark in contemporary Indonesian literature. The novel occupies a unique position at the crossroads of ecological consciousness, spiritual inquiry, critique of developmentalism, and philosophical reflection on human existence. Its protagonist, Yuda, is a rock climber whose physical ascents become allegories for existential ascent – an attempt to construct selfhood in the face of uncertainty, risk, and social alienation. The novel's philosophical density, its play between rational and non-rational registers of experience, and its engagement with questions of freedom and collective responsibility render it an exceptionally productive object for existentialist literary analysis.

Previous scholarship on existentialism in Indonesian literature has examined its manifestations in works by canonical authors. Ahmad Yasid and Abd. Syakur's (2020) study of Muhidin M. Dahlan's novel *Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Menjadi Pelacur!* demonstrates how existential freedom is dramatized through social transgression and the refusal of normative identity. Similarly, Syafril Hikbal Pane and Abdurrahman Adisaputera's (2023) analysis of Adrindia Ryandisza's *Ours* deploys Sartrean categories to examine the protagonists's childfree decision as an act of authentic self-creation. While both studies affirm the productivity of existentialist frameworks for Indonesian literary analysis, neither extends its scope to encompass the full spectrum of existentialist concerns – including the Camusian dimension of absurdity – nor does either engage with the distinctive philosophical ambitions of Utami's work.

This lacuna is significant. *Bilangan Fu* does not merely represent individual existential dilemmas; it stages a thoroughgoing confrontation between existentialist subjectivity and the structures of modernity, spirituality, and collective life that are specific to the Indonesian context. The novel's characters do not simply choose freely in a vacuum; they do so against the backdrop of rapid modernization, the erosion of indigenous ecological knowledge, and the persistence of spiritual cosmologies that resist secular rationalism. In this sense, the novel demands an analytical framework that is simultaneously attentive to classical existentialist theory and to the cultural specificity of its literary expression.

This article addresses this gap through a systematic close reading of *Bilangan Fu* guided by the existentialist philosophical frameworks of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. It argues that the novel represents existentialist experience through four analytically distinct but interrelated dimensions: (1) the search for existential meaning as departure from alienation and ignorance; (2) individual freedom as reflective, disciplined self-determination; (3) moral responsibility as an inseparable corollary of free choice; and (4) the absurd as the productive tension between human desire for rational coherence and

the world's irreducible opacity. By situating these dimensions within both existentialist theory and the cultural-historical context of contemporary Indonesia, this study aims to contribute to comparative literary studies and to enrich the scholarly understanding of Indonesian fiction's engagement with global philosophical traditions.

This study is grounded in the existentialist philosophical tradition, with primary reference to the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, whose frameworks most directly illuminate the dimensions of freedom, responsibility, and absurdity that structure *Bilangan Fu*. The study also draws on foundational existentialist thought more broadly, including the work of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Karl Jaspers, to contextualize specific thematic concerns.

### **Sartrean Existentialism: Freedom, Facticity, and Authenticity**

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism is premised on the foundational claim that "existence precedes essence": human beings are not born with a predetermined nature or purpose but rather create their identity through free choices and actions (Sartre, 1946/2007). For Sartre, human beings are "condemned to be free" – freedom is not a privilege but an inescapable condition. This radical freedom, however, is always situated: the individual exercises freedom within the constraints of facticity – the given circumstances of one's birth, body, class, and social environment (Sartre, 1943/1978). The tension between freedom and facticity gives rise to the possibility of authenticity (*mauvaise foi*, or bad faith, being its failure mode), which Sartre defines as the courageous acknowledgment of one's freedom and the full assumption of responsibility for one's choices (Cooper, 1999).

Critically for the analysis that follows, Sartrean freedom is not solipsistic. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that the encounter with the Other is constitutive of the self, and that one's choices always implicitly legislate for all of humanity (Sartre, 1943/1978). Thus, responsibility in Sartrean existentialism is both personal and universal: to choose for oneself is to choose for all. This intersubjective dimension of responsibility is particularly salient in the mountaineering sequences of *Bilangan Fu*, where the lives of climbing partners are mutually entrusted.

### **Camus and the Absurd**

Albert Camus's concept of the absurd designates the fundamental tension between human beings' persistent desire for clarity, meaning, and rational order, and the world's radical silence in the face of these demands (Camus, 1942/1991). For Camus, the absurd is not a property of the world alone, nor of the human mind alone, but arises from their confrontation. The appropriate response to the absurd, Camus argues, is neither denial (through philosophical suicide, i.e., the embrace of transcendent systems) nor literal suicide, but revolt: the lucid, defiant affirmation of life in full knowledge of its meaninglessness (Camus, 1942/1991). The absurd hero – exemplified by Sisyphus – lives without appeal, finding value in the act of existing itself.

Camus's framework is particularly productive for analyzing passages in *Bilangan Fu* in which characters encounter paradoxical or logically incoherent formulations of experience that cannot be resolved through rational discourse. The novel's mystical-mathematical paradoxes, its critique of both modernity and superstition, and its characters' acceptance of irresolvable tension all resonate with the Camusian conception of the absurd as a condition to be inhabited rather than transcended.

### **Existentialism in Literary Studies**

The application of existentialist philosophy to literary analysis is a well-established tradition in Western literary criticism (Kaufmann, 1956; Olson, 1962). More recently, scholars have productively extended this tradition to non-Western literatures, examining how existentialist themes are transformed by encounters with postcolonial subjectivity, indigenous epistemologies, and non-Western religious traditions (Quayson, 2000; Hitchcock, 2003). This study adopts this comparative, cross-cultural approach, treating existentialism not as a universal template to be mechanically applied but as a philosophical vocabulary that enables productive dialogue with the specific concerns of Indonesian literary modernity.

### **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive-analytical approach. Qualitative research is appropriate for literary analysis because it enables the researcher to engage with the complexity, depth, and contextual embeddedness of meaning in literary texts, rather than reducing them to quantifiable units (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The descriptive-analytical method facilitates the systematic description and interpretation of literary phenomena—in this case, the representation of existentialist dimensions in *Bilangan Fu*—in a thorough and theoretically grounded manner.

The primary data source is Ayu Utami's novel *Bilangan Fu* (Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2008). Secondary data include scholarly works in existentialist philosophy—principally Sartre (1943/1978, 1946/2007) and Camus (1942/1991)—as well as peer-reviewed studies in Indonesian literary criticism and comparative literature.

Data collection proceeded through multiple close readings of the novel, during which passages relevant to existentialist themes were identified, extracted, and coded according to four analytical categories: (1) search for meaning, (2) freedom of choice, (3) responsibility, and (4) absurdity. This coding scheme was derived deductively from the theoretical frameworks of Sartre and Camus, and refined inductively through engagement with the textual material, in accordance with the hermeneutic circle appropriate to literary-philosophical analysis (Ricoeur, 1976).

Data analysis followed three stages: data reduction (selection and coding of relevant passages), data presentation (systematic organization and narration of findings by

analytical category), and conclusion-drawing (synthesis of findings in relation to the theoretical framework and broader scholarly conversation). Analytical rigor was ensured through triangulation between textual evidence, primary philosophical sources, and secondary critical literature, and through reflexive attention to the interpretive assumptions guiding the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

All Indonesian quotations from the novel are provided in the original, followed by the author's English translation. Where the original Indonesian text is itself thematically significant (as in instances of linguistic playfulness or cultural specificity), this is noted in the analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### RESULTS

The analysis of *Bilangan Fu* reveals a richly textured existentialist imagination that encompasses all four analytical dimensions identified in the theoretical framework. Rather than treating these dimensions as discrete or sequential, the novel presents them as mutually constitutive aspects of the characters' existential condition. The following sections address each dimension in turn, while attending to their interconnections.

#### **The Search for Existential Meaning: Alienation, Restlessness, and Experiential Self-Construction**

The opening pages of *Bilangan Fu* establish the protagonist's existential situation through an acknowledgment of fundamental ignorance and the vague urgency of unformed desire. The following passage is paradigmatic:

*"Aku bukan pemanjat yang sejati. Sayangnya. Tak seorang pun di antara kami. Kami adalah selusin pemuda yang pada awalnya tak begitu tahu apa yang kami mau, selain mengikuti dorongan yang samar-samar. Dorongan untuk menanggung. Untuk menjalani rangkaian ujian berat yang membuktikan pada diri sendiri bahwa kami adalah manusia-manusia unggul: laki-laki yang tak menyerah pada kegenitan, kecemasan, ketakutan, ataupun bujuk-manja kemewahan kota. Lelaki yang kuat dan Merdeka."*

*["I am not a genuine climber. Unfortunately. Nor is any one of us. We were a dozen young men who at first did not really know what we wanted, other than following a vague impulse. The impulse to bear. To undergo a series of severe trials that would prove to ourselves that we were superior human beings: men who do not succumb to vanity, anxiety, fear, or the seduction of city luxury. Strong and free men." ] (Bilangan Fu, p. 12)*

This passage is remarkable for its existentialist honesty: the characters' admission that they "did not really know what they wanted" constitutes what Heidegger (1962) would term the mood of *Angst* – a fundamental attunement to one's situation that discloses the groundlessness of existence and calls the self to authentic self-appropriation. Rather than concealing this groundlessness behind inherited social roles or ready-made meanings,

the protagonists acknowledge it as the starting point of their search. This is consistent with Sartre's (1946/2007) claim that human beings begin in a condition of radical underdetermination, without a pregiven essence to anchor them.

Crucially, the search for meaning is here oriented not toward abstract intellectual discovery but toward embodied, extreme experience. The "impulse to bear" – *menanggung* in Indonesian, carrying connotations of endurance, suffering, and the bearing of a load – positions the body and its trials as the site of meaning-construction. This resonates with existentialist phenomenology's insistence on the embodied, world-engaged character of human existence (Merleau-Ponty, 1962): meaning is not found through detached contemplation but through the living of a life in all its materiality and risk.

The theme of alienation as the catalyst for existential searching is further elaborated in the following passage:

*"Aku menjadi ganjil bagi keluargaku karena aku tak bisa hidup ataupun tidur dengan televisi. Keterasingan inilah yang menyebabkan aku mencari dunia yang lain. Aku pergi ke alam, atau yang pada waktu itu kami kira alam. Ke tebing-tebing, dimana listrik tak menjangkauku."*

*["I became strange to my family because I could not live or sleep with the television on. It was this alienation that caused me to seek another world. I went to nature – or what we at that time thought was nature. To the cliffs, where electricity could not reach me."] (Bilangan Fu, p. 27)*

The protagonist's alienation here is doubly significant. At the level of social critique, it indexes the pervasive mediating presence of modern mass culture, which the character experiences as preventing authentic dwelling. At the existentialist level, it enacts what Sartre (1943/1978) describes as the experience of "being-for-others" as an alienating gaze that fixes the self in a predetermined identity. The flight to the cliffs – to a space beyond the reach of the technological apparatus of modernity – represents a bid for existential solitude, the possibility of confronting oneself without the mediating presence of society's normalizing gaze. This spatial movement is not escapism but a condition of possibility for authentic self-encounter.

The subjective, non-transferable quality of meaning so constructed is powerfully expressed in the passage where the protagonist reflects on the "pleasure of bearing" (*kenikmatan menanggung*) that cannot be shared:

*"Tapi tak bisa kubagikan kenikmatan-kenikmatan yang kualami ini – yang lebih dalam daripada rasa sakit pada otot yang terpentang seharian, perih pada luka telapak tangan, ngilu terjepit pada kaki, parut-parut tertusuk duri, jalan buntu, rasa gentar, tanggung-jawab untuk menanggung nyawa teman, rasa lega oleh keselamatan nan sementara. 'Kenikmatan menanggung' ini tak bisa kubagikan."*

*["But I cannot share these pleasures that I experience – deeper than the pain in muscles strained all day, the burning of palm wounds, the ache of feet caught in rock, the scars of thorns, the dead ends,*

*the fear, the responsibility of holding a friend's life, the relief of temporary safety. This 'pleasure of bearing' cannot be shared." ] (Bilangan Fu, p. 15)*

The paradox of pleasure in suffering is a characteristic existentialist formulation: meaning is not the product of comfort but of engagement, risk, and the full confrontation with one's finitude. The unshareable quality of this meaning is not presented as a failure of communication but as a structural feature of authentic existential experience, which is always, in its deepest register, first-personal and incommunicable (Kierkegaard, 1846/1992). This refusal of easy communal consolation marks a philosophically sophisticated engagement with the limits of intersubjectivity.

### **Freedom of Choice: Reflective Self-Determination and the Rejection of Conformity**

Sartre's (1946/2007) claim that human beings are "condemned to be free" entails that freedom is not an achievement but a condition – one that cannot be evaded even through the flight into bad faith. *Bilangan Fu* dramatizes freedom not as spontaneous caprice but as reflective, sustained self-determination maintained against social pressure and the passage of time. This is most directly expressed in the following passage:

*"Si Fulan. Ia telah pensiun sekarang. Di usia dua puluh empat. Pemilik kelingking dalam botol selai yang kusimpan baik-baik itu. Kawanku yang berwajah bulat berambut wol, yang bagaimanapun telah pernah menjadi teman berbagi dalam hidupku. Aku tetap dengan pilihan hidupku. Bahkan sampai hari ini, bertahun-tahun kemudian."*

*["Fulan. He has retired now. At twenty-four. The owner of the little finger in the jam jar that I kept carefully. My round-faced, woolly-haired friend, who nonetheless had once been a companion in sharing life with me. I have remained with my life choices. Even to this day, many years later." ] (Bilangan Fu, p. 8)*

The temporal dimension of this passage – "even to this day, many years later" – is philosophically significant. Freedom, for Sartre (1943/1978), is not exhausted by a single moment of decision; it is the ongoing project of self-constitution through time. The protagonist's sustained commitment to his choices, maintained in the face of a companion's defection to a more conventional life trajectory, instantiates what Sartre terms the "original project" – the fundamental orientation of the self through which all particular choices are organized and given meaning (Sartre, 1943/1978, p. 563).

The freedom to define one's own principles of life, rather than adopting those prescribed by modernity or convention, is articulated with notable clarity in the following passage:

*"Aku memiliki disipliniku, aku melakukan patiragaku, kujauhkan diri dari peradaban modern yang hanya memberi rangsangan-rangsangan permukaan."*

*["I have my discipline, I practice my patiraga, I distance myself from modern civilization that offers only surface stimuli." ] (Bilangan Fu, p. 20)*

The concept of *patiraga* – a Javanese practice of bodily and spiritual self-discipline – is here integrated into an existentialist vocabulary of self-determination. This is a significant cultural gesture: it suggests that the novel's existentialism is not simply imported from Western philosophical sources but is mediated through indigenous Javanese epistemologies of the self. The character's freedom is exercised not as formless spontaneity but as disciplined refusal – the active maintenance of an alternative mode of being against the "surface stimuli" of consumer modernity. This resonates with Sartre's (1946/2007) observation that genuine freedom requires the courage to resist the anonymous normativity of the social collective (what Heidegger calls *das Man*, the "they-self").

The intersubjective dimension of freedom – specifically, the recognition of the other's freedom as a limit and a responsibility – is illustrated in the following passage:

*"Ia menjawab tanpa semangat, tak seperti kecenderungannya. 'Hm. Dia punya usaha... macam-macam.' ... Aku menangkap ia tak hendak bercerita tentang pamannya. Kali ini aku tidak ingin mengganggunya. Aku diam. Kubiarkan dia memilih tema percakapan."*

*["He replied without enthusiasm, unlike his usual manner. 'Hm. He has a business... various things.' ... I sensed he did not want to speak about his uncle. This time I did not want to disturb him. I was silent. I let him choose the topic of conversation."]* (*Bilangan Fu*, p. 40)

This seemingly minor social interaction carries significant existentialist weight. The protagonist's decision to remain silent and allow the other person to "choose the topic of conversation" represents a practical recognition of the other's subjectivity and freedom – a refusal to treat the other as an object of one's own curiosity or need. This is consistent with the Sartrean ethical injunction, elaborated in the *Cahiers pour une morale* (1983), to recognize and foster the freedom of others rather than instrumentalizing it. The passage thus illustrates that freedom in *Bilangan Fu* is not merely self-regarding but constitutively relational.

### **Responsibility as the Ethical Corollary of Freedom**

Sartre's (1946/2007) dictum that "man is nothing but what he makes of himself" is inseparable from its ethical corollary: that he bears full responsibility for what he makes. In *Bilangan Fu*, this responsibility is most vividly instantiated in the mountaineering sequences, where the interconnection of individual choice and collective fate is literally a matter of life and death.

*"Kami tak pernah mabuk pada waktu ekspedisi. Sebab, masing-masing dari kami memegang nyawa teman yang lain."*

*["We were never drunk during an expedition. Because each of us held the life of the other."]* (*Bilangan Fu*, p. 13)

The idiom of "holding another's life" (*memegang nyawa teman*) deserves careful attention. It literalizes the existentialist claim that our choices always implicitly determine

outcomes for others, not merely for ourselves. The self-imposed prohibition on intoxication is not a heteronomous rule but an autonomous ethical commitment arising from full awareness of one's relational responsibility. This is Sartre's universal responsibility made manifest in the most concrete of situations: the belay rope.

The metaphysics of this collective responsibility is elaborated in the following passage, which develops a striking philosophical meditation on the indivisibility of life:

*"Aku memegang nyawa yang lain, yang lain memegang nyawaku. Dan, sesungguhnya, nyawa tak bisa dibelah-belah. Kita tak bisa kehilangan setengah nyawa saja. Pada kita ada nyawa, atau tidak ada sama sekali. Maka, jika aku memegang nyawa temanku, aku memegang seutuhnya juga. Sama seperti dia yang memiliki nyawa itu."*

*["I hold another's life, the other holds mine. And indeed, life cannot be divided. We cannot lose just half a life. In us there is life, or there is none at all. So if I hold my friend's life, I hold it wholly. Just as he who owns that life."]* (Bilangan Fu, p. 14)

This passage enacts a philosophical move of considerable sophistication. The claim that "life cannot be divided" (nyawa tak bisa dibelah-belah) functions simultaneously as a physical observation about the biological indivisibility of a person's existence and as a philosophical claim about the wholeness of moral responsibility. One cannot be partially responsible for another's life: responsibility, like the life it protects, is total. This totalizing conception of responsibility exceeds the minimal Sartrean claim and resonates with Emmanuel Levinas's (1969) ethics of the infinite obligation toward the Other – though Utami arrives at this position through literary dramatization rather than philosophical argument.

The willingness to act under conditions of radical uncertainty as a responsible existential choice is illustrated in the following passage:

*"Jika aku berhasil mengusik dia keluar, sesungguhnya aku tak tahu seperti apa dan sebesar apa dia. Dan aku tak membawa senjata apa pun selain mentalku. Tapi aku sudah mengambil keputusan. Ketika aku merasa titik yang tepat itu tiba, aku mengambil risiko."*

*["If I managed to provoke him out, I truly did not know what he looked like or how large he was. And I carried no weapon other than my mind. But I had made my decision. When I felt the right moment had arrived, I took the risk."]* (Bilangan Fu, p. 107)

The protagonist's decision to act without adequate information – relying solely on mental readiness (mental) – instantiates Sartre's (1946/2007) famous observation that we must always act "without sufficient data." The acknowledgment that "I do not know" is not a counsel of paralysis but the condition of genuine existential decision: choice is always made in the face of irreducible uncertainty, and the willingness to take responsibility for outcomes one cannot fully foresee is the mark of existential maturity. The passage thus connects the themes of freedom, responsibility, and the acceptance of risk in a tight philosophical-narrative knot.

### **The Absurdity of Life: Paradox, Irrationality, and the Limits of Modernity**

The Camusian dimension of *Bilangan Fu* is perhaps the most philosophically ambitious of the four analytical categories, as it requires the characters – and the reader – to dwell in productive tension rather than achieving resolution. The novel introduces the absurd through a paradoxical mathematical-mystical formulation:

*"Di sinilah, aku menemukan konsep yang bagiku mistis: membagi yang tak sama dengan membelah. Sebaliknya, membagi di sini sekaligus memiliki sifat penggandaan. Jika aku membagi nyawaku kepada dua belas anggota, maka aku mengalikan nyawaku dengan dua belas, di mana, pada saat yang sama, nyawaku tetap satu."*

*["It was here that I discovered a concept that seemed mystical to me: dividing is not the same as halving. On the contrary, dividing here simultaneously has the property of multiplication. If I divide my life among twelve members, then I multiply my life by twelve, where, at the same time, my life remains one."]* (*Bilangan Fu*, p. 14)

This formulation – division as multiplication, the one that becomes twelve while remaining one – deliberately confounds the logic of arithmetic and the metaphysics of identity. It cannot be accommodated within a strictly rationalist framework, and the protagonist acknowledges as much by calling it "mystical." From a Camusian perspective, this is a precise dramatization of the absurd: the human desire for rational clarity confronts an experience that exceeds and undermines rational categories. The character does not resolve the paradox but inhabits it, finding in its mystical quality a kind of meaning that rational discourse cannot supply.

The unshareable character of this paradoxical insight is underscored in the subsequent passage:

*"Aku memutuskan untuk berdiam. Tak kubangunkan satu pun kawananku. Tak jadi kubagikan rumusan mistisku tentang membagi yang sama dengan mengalikan yang senantiasa menghasilkan satu dari bukan bilangan satu."*

*["I decided to remain silent. I did not wake a single one of my companions. I did not share my mystical formula about dividing equaling multiplying, which always produces one from not-one."]* (*Bilangan Fu*, p. 15)

The protagonist's silence is not merely social reserve; it marks the recognition that the absurd cannot be communicated through the ordinary channels of rational discourse without losing its essential character. Camus (1942/1991) argues that the absurd can be evoked but not explained; the moment one attempts to systematize or rationalize it, one betrays it. The character's choice to remain silent is thus an act of fidelity to the absurd: a refusal to domesticate what cannot be domesticated.

The novel's most explicitly philosophical formulation of the absurd as a social-historical condition appears in the following passage, which stages a confrontation between modernity and superstition:

*"Modernisme memiliki jalan yang lurus, tapi tidak tujuan yang lurus. Takhayul memiliki tujuan yang lurus, tapi tidak jalan yang lurus. Modernisme adalah alat untuk memperalat. Takhayul adalah alat untuk diperalat."*

*["Modernism has a straight path, but not a straight goal. Superstition has a straight goal, but not a straight path. Modernism is a tool for using. Superstition is a tool to be used by."]* (Bilangan Fu, p. 188)

This aphoristic formulation achieves a level of philosophical compression that is rare in Indonesian fiction. Its chiasmic structure—modernity with means but without ends; superstition with ends but without means—produces an impasse that resists synthesis. Neither modernism nor superstition offers the human subject an adequate framework for meaning-making: the former instrumentalizes rationality, reducing persons to functions; the latter subordinates freedom to an irrational order. Both are, in their respective ways, systems that eliminate the very existential openness that the novel has been at pains to cultivate.

From a Camusian perspective, this passage articulates the absurd as a cultural-historical condition specific to modernity: the traditional resources of meaning (superstition, religion, communal cosmology) have been undermined by rational disenchantment, while modernity has failed to supply an adequate replacement. The character who perceives this impasse is characterized not by nihilism but by the lucid, ironic intelligence that Camus associates with the absurd consciousness—capable of seeing through the pretensions of both available systems without capitulating to despair. The inner conflict between rationalism and the recognition of the non-rational is dramatized in a further passage that recalls the Sartrean tension between facticity and transcendence:

*"Meski tak terlalu rela, sementara ini aku mengaku bahwa ada hal-hal yang nonrasional yang lumayan berharga. Parang Jati mencoba menunjukkan padaku bahwa sesungguhnya masalahnya bagiku bukan pada rasional atau tidak rasional, tetapi pada kekuatan."*

*["Even though I am not entirely willing, for the time being I admit that there are non-rational things of considerable value. Parang Jati tried to show me that the real problem for me was not rationality or irrationality, but power."]* (Bilangan Fu, p. 136)

The character Parang Jati's intervention—reframing the question from one of epistemic validity to one of power—introduces a reflexive dimension absent from classical Western existentialism. The question is not merely which framework (rational or non-rational) provides a more accurate account of the world, but which framework enables or disables human agency. This move resonates with postcolonial critiques of rationalism as a vehicle of epistemic domination (Mignolo, 2000), suggesting that Bilangan Fu's existentialism is informed by specifically Indonesian post-developmental

contexts in which the hegemony of Western rational modernity has been experienced as a form of cultural dispossession.

## DISCUSSIONS

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that *Bilangan Fu* is not simply a novel in which Western existentialist themes are applied or illustrated, but one in which existentialist concerns are transformed by their encounter with the specific cultural, spiritual, and political textures of contemporary Indonesia. Three broader theoretical implications merit discussion.

First, the novel's integration of Javanese spiritual practice (*patiraga*) and indigenous ecological ontology into a framework of existentialist self-determination points toward what might be termed a decolonial existentialism: an existentialism that resists the reduction of selfhood to the sovereign, disembodied Cartesian subject and instead grounds freedom and responsibility in embodied, ecological, and relational forms of life. This connects productively with recent scholarship on indigenous existentialisms in other cultural contexts (Coulthard, 2014; Wynter, 2003), suggesting that *Bilangan Fu* could be fruitfully situated within a global comparative framework of non-Western existentialist literature.

Second, the novel's engagement with absurdity is distinctively shaped by its critique of Indonesian developmentalism. The impasse between modernism and superstition articulated in the passage analyzed above is not a timeless philosophical abstraction but a historically specific condition: the aftermath of the New Order's authoritarian modernization program and its destruction of traditional ecological communities. The absurdity the characters experience is thus not only ontological (a feature of the human condition as such) but also historical (a product of specific political and cultural formations). This historicization of the absurd is a significant contribution of the novel to existentialist literary thought.

Third, the novel's treatment of collective responsibility—most vividly in the mountaineering sequences—suggests a conception of existentialist ethics that exceeds the individualism typically attributed to Sartrean thought. The climbing rope as a literal figure of intersubjective entanglement—"each of us holds the life of the other"—proposes a model of existential community in which freedom is exercised not despite but through radical mutual vulnerability. This resonates with recent scholarship on relational existentialism (Krueger, 2009; Zahavi, 2014) and suggests that *Bilangan Fu* may contribute original philosophical insights to ongoing debates about the social dimensions of existentialist thought.

This should explore the significance of the work's results, not repeat them. A combined Results and Discussion section is often appropriate. Avoid extensive citations and discussions of published literature.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has argued that Ayu Utami's *Bilangan Fu* constitutes a philosophically sophisticated engagement with existentialist thought, one that transforms its Western sources through the specific cultural, spiritual, and political concerns of contemporary Indonesia. Through close reading guided by the frameworks of Sartre and Camus, the analysis has identified four interconnected existentialist dimensions in the novel: a search for meaning rooted in alienation, embodied trial, and the refusal of socially given purposes; a conception of freedom as reflective, sustained self-determination that encompasses recognition of the other's freedom; a totalizing conception of moral responsibility as the necessary corollary of free choice in conditions of radical mutual vulnerability; and an engagement with the absurd as both ontological condition and historically specific cultural impasse.

The findings demonstrate that *Bilangan Fu* is not merely an instance of the reception of Western existentialism in Indonesian fiction but a creative transformation of existentialist thought that generates new philosophical insights – particularly regarding the embodied, relational, and historically conditioned character of existential freedom and responsibility. By integrating Javanese spiritual practices, ecological consciousness, and postcolonial critique into an existentialist framework, Utami's novel points toward what this study has termed a decolonial or postcolonial existentialism: a mode of existential thought adequate to the specific conditions of non-Western modernity.

This study has two main limitations that open directions for future research. First, the analysis is confined to a single novel and would benefit from comparative extension to other works by Utami (particularly the subsequent volumes of the *Bilangan Fu* series) and to other Indonesian authors engaging with philosophical themes. Second, the study does not systematically address the gender dimensions of the novel's existentialism, which deserve sustained attention given the gendered character of much of the protagonist's experience of freedom and alienation. Future research might also explore the reception of the novel among Indonesian readers and critics, attending to the ways in which existentialist themes are interpreted within Indonesian cultural and intellectual contexts.

More broadly, this study suggests that contemporary Indonesian fiction represents a rich and underexplored site for the comparative study of existentialism outside its European origins. The encounter between existentialist thought and the philosophical,

spiritual, and political traditions of the Indonesian archipelago generates literary expressions of existential experience that both resonate with and enrich the global existentialist canon.

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