

LEKRA LITERATURE IN POLITICAL CONFLICT: THE STRUGGLE FOR HEGEMONY ON ANTONIO GRAMSCI

(Sastra LEKRA dalam Konflik Politik: Pergulatan Hegemoni dalam Kerangka Pemikiran Antonio Gramsci)

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Abstract: *This paper aims to reveal literary events within Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (Lekra). Lekra literature emerged when the cultural institution was founded on August 17, 1950. Lekra was one of the organizations where writers gathered under the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI). This cultural institution upheld strong and firm principles, ideologically opposed to Manifesto Kebudayaan (Manikebu). The problem is, why is Lekra literature less known to the public, especially among students and university scholars? It seems to have been marginalized by the power of the Orde Baru (Orba) regime. What factors caused this marginalization, and what is the artistic concept of Lekra writers? To reveal these issues, this study employs Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. The study is qualitative descriptive in nature, using a literature review method. The data are sourced from documents, including books, articles, reviews, and novels related to Lekra literature. Selected data are then contextualized within past and current political conditions. Supporting data include letters and previous researcher's interviews with writers involved in Lekra. The findings show that the two conflicting cultural institutions held differing artistic ideologies. Lekra promoted the concept of "art for the people" with a socialist realism character, guided by the slogan "politics is the commander." Manikebu, on the other hand, adhered to the slogan "art for art's sake," emphasizing universal humanism. These two organizations often attacked each other and engaged in polemics in mass media. The writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer, a Lekra board member, fiercely criticized Manikebu writers through his sharp writings. Several books by Manikebu authors were burned, and their authors were detained during the Orde Lama (Orla) era. Conversely, Pram's works were banned and withdrawn from circulation during the Orba period. Pramoedya himself was detained in Jakarta and later became a political prisoner on Pulau Buru, Maluku. This study reveals positive aspects that could pave the way for reconciliation (national peace). Writers from both opposing camps and other political figures have begun to choose a path of peace. In the era of Reformasi, which upholds democracy, freedom of expression, and ideological differences, such disagreements need not be contested. Instead, these differences should be celebrated as part of Indonesia's rich diversity.*

Keywords: *Hegemony, Lekra Politics, Literature*

A. INTRODUCTION

Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (Lekra), established on 17 August 1950, had six creative institutions. These cultural institutions operated in the arts, namely visual arts, film, literature, drama, music, and dance. Among these six art forms, literature was the most prominent (Artika, 2024:2). Therefore, it can be said that Lekra was identical with literature. In general, the study of Lekra literature has not been widely known by the public, because the Orde Baru government deliberately closed access to public information (Lane, 2012:6). At its inception, Lekra did not declare itself as an organization under the PKI. However, its cultural struggle concept clearly showed that this organization

was aligned with the party. This was emphasized by Budiman (in Sambodja, 2010), that since Lekra was founded, politics entered the body of Indonesian literature, because its policy in the field of literature was: “Politics as the Commander.”

According to Sumardjo (1992:179) and Sambodja (2010), the Lekra organization developed socialist realism literature. This literary movement, as in its center in the Soviet Union, was merely a tool of its political party. Lekra literature was literature that served political interests. The five basic concepts in Lekra literature (Artika, 2024 and Soemardjo, 1992) were: art for the people, politics as the commander, broadening and elevating, the down to the grassroots movement, and organization.

Based on those five concepts, Lekra writers were deeply convinced of the truth of their movement. They regarded writers outside Lekra, as proponents of universal humanism (Manikebu), as enemies to be eliminated. Their slogan was that enemies must surrender or otherwise be destroyed. As a result, a series of acts of terror emerged against writers outside the Lekra circle such as Manikebu and Lesbumi. According to Sambodja (2010) and Taum (2013), writers who were not under Lekra became targets, especially independent writers who dared to voice rejection of the slogan “politics as the commander.”

The existence of literature under Lekra is now beginning to be studied, along with the reform era characterized by public information transparency. Several researchers have shown interest in Lekra literature, such as Sambodja (2010), Taum (2013), and Artika (2024, 2016). Artika studied Lekra literature using New Historicism theory, while Sambodja examined it from the perspective of historiography. Taum (in the same month and year, September 2013) wrote an article about Lekra poetry. In his article, Taum analyzed travelogue literature in the form of poems by the communist figure Nyoto. Likewise, Taum examined Lekra poems written by Bandahoro and Wispi. The most recent research by Nugraha (2025), later published in a book titled *Sosio Historiositas Godlob dan Lintrik-nya Danarto Kajian Historisisme Baru* (2025), discusses two short stories by Danarto in relation to the 1965 Gestapu Event. Although these two stories were not part of Lekra literature, the analysis connects them with the G30S human tragedy. The book is also complemented by perspectives from various figures on the G30S event, both from abroad and within Indonesia, with their differing versions.

Artika (2024), in the book *Representasi Ideologi dalam Sastra Lekra*, examines socio-political issues and the reciprocal relationship between poetry, short stories, and non-literary texts. The poems analyzed are *Gugur Merah* and the short story *Laporan dari Bawah*. Both literary works reflect the relationship between literature and ideology that promotes Marxism. The theme of this relationship is elaborated into three main issues: (1) the suffering of the working masses, (2) class consciousness and struggle, and (3) socialism.

According to Artika (2024:150), placing Lekra literature within the history of Indonesian literature requires a cultural policy decision. This was once stated by Jassin (1968), considering that Lekra was politically banned through a decree issued by Soeharto as the recipient of Supersemar. Decree No. 1/3/1996 contained: (1) the dissolution of the PKI

including its organizational branches, and (2) the declaration of PKI as a prohibited organization throughout the Republic of Indonesia. In his presentation, Artika mentioned that the poetry collection *Gugur Merah* contained 452 poems from 111 poets. All of these poems had previously been published in *Harian Rakyat* during the period 1954 - 1965 (2024:53). Among the hundreds of literary works, the name of Pramoedya Ananta Toer was not recorded, even though Pram was a central board member of Lekra who was also active in writing in the mass media.

The short story *Laporan dari Bawah*, according to Artika's notes, contained 96 titles by 63 authors. All of these works had previously been published in *Harian Rakyat* during the period 1951–1965. Both the poems and short stories included in Lekra literature were not widely known by literary enthusiasts. In fact, *Harian Rakyat*, which served as the party's mouthpiece, was banned from circulation and destroyed by the Orde Baru regime. This body of Lekra literature is important to study, as it represents a cultural product that once developed in Indonesia. Beyond the political context, Lekra literature is a cultural document that deserves to be studied by today's generation through formal education.

Previously, Artika wrote about "Lima Cerpen Propaganda Lekra" (*Jurnal Aksara*, 2016, vol. 28 no. 2, pp. 129 - 142). In that article, the short story analyzed was *Laporan dari Bawah*. The study concluded that propaganda short stories demonstrated a close relationship between literature, ideology, and politics. The connection between literature and politics showed that these short stories functioned as propaganda tools of the PKI. Within this relationship, literature was subordinated to politics, and ideological truth was regarded as superior to literary value.

The expectation of including Lekra literature in the history of Indonesian literature was also conveyed by Sambodja in his book *Historiografi Sastra Indonesia 1960-an* (2010). According to Sambodja, the literary works produced by Lekra writers were part of Indonesia's cultural assets that had long been neglected. Today, studies of Lekra literature are beginning to emerge, enriching the corpus of Indonesian literature. If *Tap MPRS No. XXV/MPRS/1966* were to be revoked, genuine freedom of expression would truly exist in Indonesia. Lekra writers would be freer to express their ideas and thoughts as well as freely distribute their works (2020:194).

Taum (2013) showed interest in Lekra literature in his article titled "*Mengenal H.R. Bandahoro dan Agam Wispi: Dua Penyair Terkemuka Lekra.*" This article was published in the book *Butir-butir dan Gagasan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia serta Pengajarannya*. According to Taum, Bandahoro and Wispi were two of the most prominent Lekra poets. Bandahoro became very popular during the administration of President Soekarno. His poems were often required to be recited by students, such as, "*no one intends to go home / even though death awaits.*" (tak seorang berniat pulang / walau mati menanti) Agam Wispi was also the Lekra poet who published the most works in *Harian Rakyat*. He even published his poetry anthology entitled *Matinya Seorang Petani*, which was later banned during the Orde Baru era.

The presence of these two poets, according to Taum (2013), enriched Lekra poetry as literary works that did not always highlight the characteristics of socialist realism. Among

their poems were also lyrical poetry, atmospheric poetry, metaphorical and allegorical works, as well as poetry using figurative language. In his analysis, Taum focused more on the poems of these two poets without attempting to connect them to the political power of the Soekarno era leading up to the period of prohibition. Nevertheless, he briefly mentioned their relationship with the Lekra organization through the biographies of Bandahoro and Wispi included in the article, before discussing the distinctive features and themes of their poetry.

Not only analyzing these two poets, in the same month, September 2013, Taum also examined the poet Nyoto, a central figure of the PKI. His article was titled "*Nyoto: Perintis Sastra Travelog Indonesia.*" This work demonstrated Taum's strong interest in Lekra literature, even identifying the travelogue (journey) literary genre, which had almost never been explored by Indonesian writers. Taum also briefly discussed Nyoto's biography. From this life history, it is clear that Nyoto and his poetry aligned with the parent organization Lekra. Lekra was affiliated with the Communist Party, which sided with the weak, the poor, the ignorant, and the oppressed.

B. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach, namely by describing the phenomenon of Lekra literature. The description is focused on the perspective of discourse and power, which has not been examined by previous researchers. Lekra literature, through its parent organization the Communist Party was once part of political power in the early 1960s. In literary studies related to political power, it can be analyzed through Antonio Gramsci's theory of Hegemony. For Gramsci, literature is unfinished works (Anwar, 2010:66). Gramsci viewed literature as an integral part of a community. Literature has a historical unity and is used to understand models of power, not on the basis of coercion, but rather through agreement, consensus, and rationality. The form of power referred to, according to Ratna (2013:492), is discursive in nature.

Power in the form of discourse was quite dominant in Lekra's activities, compared to other artistic practices such as music, dance, painting, and film. In fact, Lekra became almost identical with literature (Suaka, 2025). Gramsci used the concept of hegemony to examine political, cultural, and ideological forms in society, where a fundamental class could build its leadership as something different from coercive domination. Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which first developed in Europe in the 1880s, later spread throughout the world. In Indonesia, the theory of hegemony has been employed since the 1980s, particularly with the rise of cultural studies centers at several universities.

The data were collected through literature study using documentary techniques. Data and facts were obtained from previous researchers. Other documents were taken from newspapers, magazines, and articles discussing Lekra literature. Since Lekra literature is not yet popular among the younger generation, a historical approach was applied to introduce today's generation to the civilization, history, and culture of the nation's past. The results of the analysis are presented in a descriptive qualitative manner with a deductive approach. General aspects of Lekra literature are presented first, followed by specific descriptions in order to arrive at a conclusion.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Literature claimed as the product of Lekra is still in search of a formula, as it was once silenced by the Orde Baru regime. Lekra literature exists in a liminal state between presence and absence. In the historical development of Indonesia's cultural politics, this literature undeniably existed, grew, and even became the mouthpiece of the party. However, after the PKI was banned by the government through *Tap MPRS No. XXV/MPRS/1966*, Lekra was likewise prohibited. This condition cannot be separated from the political situation in Indonesia following the outbreak of the 30 September Movement coup (G30S). After the failed coup, many writers affiliated with Lekra were arrested, imprisoned, or forced into exile.

The interconnection between literature and politics at that time was indeed evident, since regulations required cultural institutions to operate within the domain of political parties. Politics was identical with power. Lekra came to prominence partly because of its proximity to state power, as described by Gramsci in his theory of Hegemony. The concept of state power has long been debated by thinkers since Ancient Greece. Plato and Aristotle noted that the state requires absolute power to educate its citizens with rational moral values.

According to Gramsci (Patria and Arif, 2003:23), in everyday life the state is a political reality that we almost accept as something given. This tendency occurs because the state, as it is known and experienced daily, seems to exist outside human consciousness. At the level of individual awareness, the existence of the state is only felt when it collides with power. Referring to Gramsci's perspective, such a collision with power occurred between the Manifesto writers and Lekra, which at the time was affiliated with state authority.

1. Political Conflict

Although Lekra was founded in 1950, its significant role only became apparent in 1957. In that year, Lekra succeeded in attracting writers to join its organization. The methods used by Lekra to gain the attention of writers were both economic and psychological. The economic approach was carried out by providing financial assistance to writers who, at that time, could not make a living from their works, while the government also paid little attention to their welfare. The psychological approach was carried out by offering important positions within Lekra and sending writers to socialist countries such as China and the Soviet Union. Several well-known writers who were drawn into Lekra included Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Utuy Tatang Sontani, Rivai Apin, Boejoeng Saleh, S. Rukiah, Sobron Aidit, among others.

Recent discussions of Lekra literature have tended to emphasize the role of writers and its political aspects. Earlier studies focused more on poetry and short stories (Artika, 2016; Taum, 2013). In the political context, the central figure of Lekra's Central Board, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, became the primary focus. Pram was regarded as the central figure of Lekra, even though his works themselves did not clearly show leftist tendencies. He became internationally renowned, having been nominated six times for the Nobel Prize in Literature (interview with Astuti Pramoedya, 29 July 2025). Thus, it is interesting to highlight Pram as a writer categorized as part of Lekra, while also having been a political prisoner.

Since 1959, Lekra's position had grown stronger within Indonesia's cultural conflicts. This was due to the increasingly powerful role of the PKI in the nation's political arena. Through the implementation of Guided Democracy, almost all authority was concentrated in the hands of President Soekarno. The President called for a return to the nation's own identity while simultaneously rejecting foreign cultures, particularly Western culture. Lekra supported this call by adopting antiUnited States, antiDutch, and antiMalaysia stances. Here, Gramsci's model of hegemony theory was clearly practiced in the activities of this cultural organization.

The hegemony of power can be seen in extreme actions within the arts and culture, such as the burning of books and songs in the form of vinyl records. Popular Indonesian songs, mocked as "ngak ngik ngok" music, were then burned. This destruction was carried out at Ikada/Monas Square and at the University of Indonesia campus by Lekra (Ismail, 1993:xi). The banning of works by Manikebu writers was justified on the grounds that they were counter-revolutionary and in opposition to the concept of socialist realism promoted by Lekra.

According to Ismail (2006), the Lekra leadership systematically launched full-scale attacks on artists and writers whose ideologies differed from that of Lekra. They engaged in character assassination, particularly targeting those who resisted through the Manikebu declaration. These writers were labeled as reactionary, counter-revolutionary, and not revolutionary in spirit. They were seen as being out of step with the President's *Nasakom* program (Nationalism, Religion, and Communism). Conversely, the Manikebu writers argued that the art promoted by Lekra was merely political, serving to perpetuate power rather than standing for society at large.

2. The Dynamics of Lekra

These differences in principle gave rise to sharp polemics. The prominent role of Lekra was exemplified by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. During the period before and after the G30S tragedy, Pram's presence was full of dynamics. Society was divided between supporters and opponents. Many foreign scholars praised Pram's literary achievements (Teeuw, 1997; Bandel, 2013; Boef and Snoeck, 2008), while many others, especially from within Indonesia, strongly despised him. This controversy extended not only in the 1960s but also persists to the present.

After joining Lekra, Pram was assigned to manage the cultural section *Lentera* in the daily *Bintang Timur* (Hutasuhut, 2006). Cultural figures and writers who were weak or hesitant, as long as they were willing to join Lekra, would quickly be elevated, popularized, praised, and glorified. They were sent abroad, especially to communist countries such as the Soviet Union. Their works were translated into the languages of those countries, and even if the works had not yet been assessed, the honorarium was paid in advance. This highly indulgent treatment attracted writers to join Lekra.

Lekra's position became increasingly strong. Pram accused Hamka, a writer from the Lembaga Seni dan Budaya Muslim Indonesia, of plagiarism. According to Pram, the novel *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van der Wijck* was plagiarized from the novel *Al-Majdulin* by the Egyptian writer Mustafa Luthfi Al-Manfaluthi (Samboja, 2010:156). By accusing Hamka of plagiarism, Hutasuhut (2006) argued, Pram intended to undermine Hamka's reputation as an ulama in the eyes of the Muslim community, especially since Hamka

was then the leader of the religious organization Muhammadiyah. Such turmoil was deliberately created by Lekra under Pram's leadership.

The Manikebu writer Mohtar Lubis stated that the words used by Pram against non-communist writers and artists were extremely harsh and cruel, akin to "total eradication," meaning that they should be eliminated and no longer function as writers or artists at all (*Horison*, October 1995). The so-called "total eradication" referred to the implementation of revolutionary action without hesitation in eliminating those who disagreed with Lekra/PKI.

Ismail added that Lekra proposed to the government the banning of books, and this proposal was successfully implemented in 1965. They launched a campaign of character assassination against non-Lekra writers such as Mochtar Lubis, Hamka, HB Jassin, Sutan Takdir Alisyahbana, Usmar Ismail, and Asrul Sani, systematically employing abusive language continuously in the cultural section *Lentera* of the daily *Bintang Timur*, led by Pramodya. *Bintang Timur* also reported that two million counterrevolutionary books had been burned. Throughout this repression of creative freedom, Lekra enforced the implementation of the ideology of socialist realism. This ideology, as the philosophical foundation of Lekra, was in direct opposition to the ideology of Manikebu art, namely universal humanism.

The writer and journalist Mochtar Lubis was among those who disagreed with Lekra. He led the newspaper *Indonesia Raya* and often engaged in polemics with Pram in the mass media. As a result, Lubis's fate was the same as Hamka's during the Old Order era when PKI held power. Mochtar Lubis was accused of slandering the authorities and was sentenced to 10 years in prison, while Hamka was sentenced to 2.5 years. Five months before the outbreak of G30S in 1965, Pram issued the signal that 1965 would be the year of "total eradication" (*Bintang Timur*, May 9, 1965; *Horison*, 2006).

On May 6, 1964, President Soekarno banned the *Manifes Kebudayaan*. Books and writings by the signatories of the *Manifes Kebudayaan* were prohibited from being read. Moreover, they were banned from working in any government institutions and from organizing activities of any kind. Violations of this ban would be considered subversive activities (Rosidi, 1988:70). In this regard, Jassin was prohibited from teaching at the Faculty of Letters, Universitas Indonesia, and Taufik Ismail was not allowed to continue his studies abroad. Both literary figures were supporters of the *Manifes Kebudayaan*. Power had hegemonized those who could not escape the political practices of the authorities.

The close relationship between Lekra writers and the PKI and the ruling power, along with their control of major mass media at the time, enabled them to use the hand of power to silence the writers of the *Manifes Kebudayaan*. The literary works produced by Manikebu writers were banned from circulation and burned at Universitas Indonesia. In this case, it can be said that Lekra itself committed errors during the Old Order era (Sambodja, 2010:5 - 6).

3. Transitional Period

The transitional period of power from the *Orde Lama* to the *Orde Baru* once again witnessed hegemony in the form of book banning. The *Orde Baru* government carried out mass prohibitions against books authored by writers suspected of involvement in

G30S. The institutions that issued the banning instructions were the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Attorney General's Office. According to calculations by several writers cited by *Jaringan Kerja Budaya*, the number of banned books up to 1970 reached 2,000 titles. This figure itself cannot be confirmed, since documentation regarding the banning process is incomplete. Later, through Attorney General Decree No. Kep.052/JA/5/1981, the government banned the circulation of the novels *Bumi Manusia* and *Anak Semua Bangsa* by Pramoedya (*Menentang Peradaban Pelarangan Buku di Indonesia, Jaringan Kerja Budaya*, 1999).

The contents of both novels were explicitly deemed to be in conflict with *Ketetapan MPRS No. XXV/MPRS/1966*, dated July 5, 1966, concerning the Dissolution of the Partai Komunis Indonesia as a prohibited organization. After being carefully examined, both *Bumi Manusia* and *Anak Semua Bangsa*, with the sharpness of Pramoedya's pen and his subtle incorporation of historical data, were accused of surreptitiously disseminating the teachings of Marxism and Leninism. Not only these two novels, but also other works by Pramoedya—*Rumah Kaca* and *Gadis Pantai*were banned from circulation under Attorney General's Decree No. 061/J.A./1988.

The Attorney General's Office confiscated copies of *Bumi Manusia* from bookstores and book agents. Some individuals who owned the novel voluntarily surrendered their copies to the authorities, fearing trouble with the security apparatus. However, according to Wahyudi (2019:50), of the 20,000 copies of the novel published by *Hasta Mitra*, fewer than 1,000 were successfully confiscated. The rest remained in the hands of readers. This indicates that many readers were genuinely interested in the novel's content. This curiosity may also have been driven by Pram's controversial life, which led many people to refuse to hand over the novel to the authorities.

Observing the cultural conflict between *Lekra* and *Manikebu* reveals a concrete struggle for power in the Gramscian sense. While Gramsci argued that hegemony is often exercised subtly and unconsciously within society, in this case it was no longer subtle but rather enforced and deliberate. During the *Orde Lama*, *Lekra's* influence enabled it to sideline *Manikebu* writers and suppress their works. Under the *Orde Baru*, the authorities also banned the circulation of works by *Lekra* writers and imprisoned many of them. Thus, Gramsci's concept of hegemony persisted and was tested under two successive regimes. Could this be considered a form of retaliatory power? In reality, the effects in both periods were strikingly similar: silencing, book burnings, and imprisonment. Yet Fadli Zon, Minister of Culture and former editor of *Horison* magazine, remarked that it was no longer the time for revenge: "For revenge, it is already too late and serves no purpose," he stated (*Horison*, 6–10/XXX/1995).

Culture, often associated with refinement, inevitably found its way into the realm of power. Political authority assumed a dominant role in such circumstances, as neither cultural organization could detach itself from the grasp of power. *Lekra* functioned as the cultural institution under the *Orde Lama*, while *Manikebu*, in its later development, leaned toward alignment with the *Orde Baru*. This tendency became particularly evident in the involvement of certain writers in pivotal events most notably in the aftermath of G30S and the controversy surrounding the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Literature from the Philippines. The award granted to Pramoedya was rejected by *Manikebu* writers, who highlighted his past involvement in the cultural organization *Lekra*.

D. CONCLUSION

The controversies that unfolded during the transition from the *Orde Lama* to the *Orde Baru* reflect the broader trajectory of Indonesian literature and culture. However, from the perspective of Gramsci's theory of hegemony, these events were fundamentally political conflicts rather than literary ones. This is evident in *Lekra's* guiding principle of "politics as the commander." Since politics aims to seize power, it is intrinsically tied to authority. For *Lekra*, its writers and their works functioned as propaganda tools of the party. In *Lekra's* view, ideology held a higher position than literary aesthetics. This stood in stark contrast to *Manikebu's* concept of "art for art's sake" and its foundation in universal humanism.

The conflict between *Lekra* and *Manikebu* writers was therefore essentially a political struggle beyond the realm of literature. Given the pervasive influence of power, when shifts in the political landscape occurred, they did not necessarily bring about positive change. History repeated itself: under the *Orde Baru*, *Lekra* writers experienced the same forms of repression once faced by *Manikebu* writers, such as book bans, imprisonment, and restrictions on freedom of expression. Both models of power strategy operated under the logic of hegemony, each working to secure and preserve authority.

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