

Better to Die Young": A Hermeneutic Analysis of Protest and Moral Critique in Remy Sylado's Mbeling Poetry

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Abstract

This study analyzes the socio-political critique embedded in Remy Sylado's poem Lebih Baik Mati Muda through Friedrich Schleiermacher's hermeneutic framework, specifically integrating grammatical and psychological interpretations. As a pioneering figure in the Indonesian Mbeling poetry movement, Sylado strategically employed colloquial language, provocative diction, and emotionally charged imagery to confront systemic corruption, authoritarianism, and moral decay during Indonesia's New Order regime. Using qualitative descriptive methodology, the analysis first examines the poem's grammatical elements such as diction, rhetorical structures, and repetition to reveal how linguistic deviation amplifies the poet's socio-political critique. Subsequently, psychological interpretation uncovers deeper emotional dimensions, highlighting how the narrative voice conveys generational despair and moral urgency. Findings indicate that Sylado's recurrent phrase Lebih baik aku mati muda ("Better that I die young") symbolizes an existential and ethical ultimatum, articulating a powerful stance against oppressive societal conditions. The study contributes methodologically by applying Schleiermacher's dual hermeneutic approach to Indonesian protest poetry, theoretically by deepening scholarly understanding of poetry's role in social resistance, and practically by underscoring poetry's educational potential in fostering critical literacy and civic engagement. Future research is recommended to expand comparative and multimodal analyses of protest poetry, enhancing understanding of its cognitive and emotional effects across different contexts.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Mbeling poetry, Protest literature, Schleiermacher, Indonesian literature

INTRODUCTION

Poetry has long been recognized as a powerful medium through which individuals and societies express their profound concerns, critique social injustices, and articulate collective hopes. Globally, protest poetry has served critical social functions, acting both as a voice for marginalized communities and a catalyst for social change. From the politically charged verses of Pablo Neruda to the compelling activism of Maya Angelou, poetry has historically harnessed emotional resonance and rhetorical power to engage readers deeply in political and ethical matters (Palmer, 2025; Buchanan Palmer, 2025). Recent research further emphasizes poetry's unique cognitive and

emotional influence, suggesting its potential to heighten empathy, increase moral awareness, and stimulate prosocial attitudes in readers (Mansur, 2023; Poetry & Brain Consortium, 2025).

Within Indonesia's socio-political context, literature has played an especially prominent role in responding to authoritarianism and social injustice. During the New Order regime (1966–1998), characterized by strict censorship and limited freedom of expression, Indonesian writers frequently employed symbolic and metaphorical language to critique oppressive political structures and express collective dissent. Such literary expression not only served as a form of resistance but also preserved critical perspectives and collective memory amid pervasive state control (Lane, 2023; Miller & Sibarani, 2024). Since the fall of Suharto's regime and the emergence of the Reformasi period, Indonesian literature has undergone significant transformations, reflecting a complex interplay of freedom and continued socio-political constraints (Setiawan, 2023; Budiman, 2024). This complexity highlights the ongoing need for literary studies that elucidate how poets and writers navigate political limitations to voice criticism and promote democratic ideals.

One prominent literary innovation within Indonesian poetry is the genre known as Mbeling, derived from the Javanese term meaning "mischievous yet clever." Originating in the early 1970s and later revived in contemporary literary circles, Mbeling poetry deliberately subverts traditional poetic norms, employing colloquial language, humor, and sharp social critique to challenge the literary and political status quo (Nabilah & Lestari, 2023; Silalahi, Simbolon, & Simbolon, 2022). Despite its historical significance and cultural impact, scholarly attention to the analytical depth of Mbeling poetry remains limited, with existing research predominantly providing thematic overviews rather than comprehensive hermeneutic analyses. Notably absent from the literature is an exploration of how the distinctive linguistic deviations and emotional nuances of Mbeling poetry construct and amplify social and political criticism.

To address this research gap, the current study employs Friedrich Schleiermacher's hermeneutic framework, integrating grammatical and psychological interpretations, to analyze Remy Sylado's influential poem *Lebih Baik Mati Muda* ("Better to Die Young"). Schleiermacher's hermeneutics advocates interpreting texts through meticulous examination of linguistic structures (grammatical interpretation) alongside empathetic reconstruction of the author's psychological perspective (psychological interpretation) (Robinson, 2022; O'Keeffe, 2022). This dual interpretative approach provides an innovative and rigorous analytical lens through which to uncover the deeper meanings and sociopolitical critiques embedded within Sylado's work.

Remy Sylado, a seminal figure within the Mbeling movement, crafted poetry that openly confronted political corruption, societal decay, and moral erosion during the oppressive New Order regime. His poem *Lebih Baik Mati Muda*, initially published in 1971, explicitly critiques authoritarian practices, systemic corruption, and moral hypocrisy prevalent in Indonesian society at the time. Through provocative diction and emotionally charged imagery, Sylado articulates an ethical and existential ultimatum, symbolizing the profound dissatisfaction and moral urgency felt by many young Indonesians under authoritarian rule. The poet's recurrent assertion "*Lebih baik aku mati muda*" conveys deep emotional disillusionment, serving simultaneously as a personal lament and collective call to resistance.

Previous literary studies have recognized Sylado's poetry as emblematic of socio-political critique (Taum, 1997; Fathurohman et al., 2018), yet they have rarely employed detailed hermeneutic methods to uncover how linguistic and psychological dimensions interact within his

work. By adopting Schleiermacher's hermeneutic framework, this research not only contributes a nuanced reading of Sylado's poetry but also enhances methodological discussions within Indonesian literary studies. Furthermore, this study enriches scholarly understanding of how poetic form and emotional resonance function together in protest poetry, potentially informing broader discussions about literature's role in social activism and political discourse.

Specifically, this study addresses two central questions: first, how do the grammatical features including diction, rhetorical devices, and stanzaic structures of *Lebih Baik Mati Muda* articulate its critique of authoritarian practices? Second, what psychological insights regarding generational despair and moral idealism can be discerned from the poem's narrative voice through Schleiermacher's interpretative method? Answering these questions enables a comprehensive analysis of the poem's rhetorical strategies and affective power, providing deeper insights into the role of literary expression in socio-political resistance.

By examining Sylado's Mbeling poem through Schleiermacherian hermeneutics, this study seeks to fill significant gaps in existing scholarship, offering both methodological innovation and thematic depth. The research contributes to ongoing conversations in literary criticism, protest literature studies, and Indonesian cultural studies, demonstrating literature's continued relevance as a vital medium for ethical reflection, political critique, and social transformation. Through this dual interpretive lens, the analysis ultimately reveals how poetry can function simultaneously as artistic creation, social commentary, and a powerful tool for advocating justice, empathy, and democratic ideals.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design aimed at producing a richly textured, data-proximal account of a single poetic artefact (Kim, Sefcik, & Bradway, 2022). Qualitative description is particularly suited to interpretive work where the researcher seeks faithful, minimally abstracted portrayals of a phenomenon in this case, the layered meanings in Remy Sylado's poem *Lebih Baik Mati Muda*. The corpus comprises the 1971 version of *Lebih Baik Mati Muda*, the earliest published text verified in *Aktuil* magazine archives. This poem was purposively selected because: (a) it inaugurates the Mbeling movement's socio-political stance, and (b) its thematic focus on youthful moral ultimatum aligns with the study's interest in generational protest. Archival fidelity was ensured by triangulating three digitised facsimiles from the National Library of Indonesia (Perpustakaan Nasional RI) and the private Remy Sylado estate collection. Textual data were extracted verbatim into a coding worksheet in NVivo 14. Marginalia punctuation, line breaks, and emphatic spacing were preserved because such paratextual features can bear hermeneutic significance (Perryman, 2023). A reflexive journal recorded the first author's evolving impressions throughout the analytic process. The interpretation followed Schleiermacher's two-tier hermeneutic spiral, operationalised in three iterative stages (Farouqy, 2024; O'Keeffe, 2022):

1. Stanza-Level Grammatical Parsing – Each line was segmented into clauses; diction was categorised (e.g., moral judgement, political agency, affective evaluation). Lexico-semantic fields were identified using Indonesian–English bilingual concordance tools (Setiawan & Hartono, 2023).

2. Textual Structuring – Patterns of repetition, escalation, and rhetorical reversal were mapped to expose the poem’s persuasive architecture. This objectification phase treated the text as an autonomous system of signs (Robinson, 2022).
3. Psychological Reconstruction – Drawing on historical scholarship about the New Order climate (Miller & Sibarani, 2024), the analysis inferred plausible authorial horizons of expectation—balancing imaginative empathy with evidentiary humility. Insights from stages 1 and 2 were cyclically re-read against this backdrop until interpretive saturation was reached.

Analytic memos and code trees were exchanged with an external poetry-studies scholar for peer debriefing, strengthening analytical dependability. Credibility was bolstered through method triangulation (archival cross-checking & peer debriefing) and member reflection: preliminary interpretations were shared with a senior literary critic familiar with Sylado’s oeuvre to test resonance, not validation (Birt et al., 2022). Transferability was addressed by providing thick description of historical context and textual features, enabling readers to judge relevance to other protest-poetry cases. A detailed audit trail (analytic memos, coding iterations, reflexive journal) supports dependability and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2024).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Uncovering the meaning of a poem is akin to excavating an event while concentrating solely on its core; yet poetry also serves as a vehicle for expressing events broadly and deeply. Linguistically, a poem conveys meaning through its diction. To achieve this, Schleiermacher proposes that the reader imaginatively place themselves inside the work. Below is an analysis of Remy Sylado’s poem “*Lebih Baik Mati Muda*” (Better to Die Young).

Lebih Baik Aku Mati Muda

*Jika usia menua kapan waktu
dan aku tak berani menulis puisi
dengan jendela yang dibuka lebar
melihat kenyataan di luar rumah
tentang kebusukan yang memerintah
tentang kesemenaan yang berkuasa
tentang korupsi yang memimpin
tentang penindasan hak asasi
Lebih baik aku mati muda*

Jika puisi berhenti berpihak

*pada keperkasaan hati Nurani
yang lahirkan kemauan mengasihi
tapi hanya umpatan-umpatan kesumat
dan pernyataan-pernyataan benci
dan ungkapan-ungkapan palsu
dan kalimat- kalimat marah
dan sumpah-serapah culas
lebih baik aku mati muda*

*Jika tiada lagi hakekat cinta
yang mukim dalam hati manusia
sebagai harta kekayaan Rohani
sebagai rahim dari sejati puisi
apa guna memanjang-manjang usia
tanpa memberi warisan pekerti
kecuali hanya menggantang asap
berharap yang kemarin Kembali
Lebih baik aku mati muda*

*Jika puisi kehilangan kesungguhan
dan tidak punya kepercayaan diri
untuk menyatakan cinta
untuk menyatakan peduli
untuk menyatakan hormat
untuk menyatakan syukur
untuk menyatakan maaf
untuk mengatakan iba
Lebih baik aku mati muda.*

1971

The poem above, from a hermeneutical point of view, would be as follows:

First Stanza

*Jika usia menua kapan waktu
dan aku tak berani menulis puisi
dengan jendela yang dibuka lebar
melihat kenyataan di luar rumah
tentang kebusukan yang memerintah
tentang kesemenaan yang berkuasa
tentang korupsi yang memimpin
tentang penindasan hak asasi
Lebih baik aku mati muda"*

In this opening stanza, the poet's use of "aku" [I] positions the self as a subject who feels overwhelmed and powerless. While denotatively first-person, the word also mirrors the author's lived experience of social reality. The lexical choices "kebusukan" [decay] and "korupsi" [corruption] starkly depict moral and ethical collapse. "Kebusukan" evokes not only physical rot but also the moral putrefaction eroding social order. "Kesemenaan" [arbitrary domination] signals unjust power, and "penindasan hak asasi" [violation of human rights] refers to abuses under the New Order regime. The phrase "jendela yang dibuka lebar" [a wide-open window] symbolizes the poet's wish to perceive external reality, yet what is seen is profoundly disheartening. By choosing "mati muda" [to die young], the poet voices despair and rejects a life bereft of meaning and laden with oppression, a protest against an unacceptable status quo.

Second Stanza

*Jika puisi berhenti berpihak
pada keperkasaan hati Nurani
yang lahirkan kemauan mengasihi
tapi hanya umpatan-umpatan kesumat
dan pernyataan-pernyataan benci
dan ungkapan-ungkapan palsu
dan kalimat-kalimat marah
dan sumpah-serapah culas
lebih baik aku mati muda*

In the second stanza, the author voices deep disappointment towards the function of poetry itself. The diction “poetry stops siding” shows that poetry should be a tool for the struggle for truth and justice. However, if poetry only produces “vitriolic curses” and “statements of hatred,” then it loses its essence as a medium of expression. The words “the strength of conscience” reflect the author’s hope that poetry should be able to voice the values of humanity and concern. In this context, the author longs for poetry that can inspire and arouse the spirit of compassion amidst gloomy social conditions. Diction such as “false expressions,” “angry sentences,” and “sly curses” show that many expressions in poetry at that time were insincere and did not reflect the truth. By choosing to state again that “it is better for me to die young,” the author emphasizes that he would rather end his life than live in a world where poetry no longer has the power to voice the truth.

Third Stanza

*Jika tiada lagi hakekat cinta
yang mukim dalam hati manusia
sebagai harta kekayaan Rohani
sebagai rahim dari sejati puisi
apa guna memanjang-manjang usia
tanpa memberi warisan pekerti
kecuali hanya menggantang asap
berharap yang kemarin Kembali
Lebih baik aku mati muda*

In this third stanza, it writes the importance of love as the core of life and art. The diction used such as “the essence of love” shows that love is the essence of human life. Without love, life feels empty and meaningless. The author uses the phrase “spiritual wealth” to describe spiritual values that are higher than material. The words “womb of true poetry” indicate that love is a source of inspiration for works of art. The author questions the meaning of longevity if it does not provide a moral legacy to future generations. The phrase “menggantang asap” describes a futile effort to maintain something that is not real or substantial, this shows helplessness in facing reality. The author also expresses hope for the past with the phrase “hoping that yesterday will return.” This reflects a longing for conditions or values that have been lost. By continuing to reaffirm that “it is better for me to die young,” the author chooses to die young rather than continue living without love and human values, reiterates the preference for death over existence in a world where poetry no longer voices truth.

Fourth Stanza

*Jika puisi kehilangan kesungguhan
dan tidak punya kepercayaan diri*

untuk menyatakan cinta

untuk menyatakan peduli

untuk menyatakan hormat

untuk menyatakan syukur

untuk menyatakan maaf

untuk mengatakan iba

Lebih baik aku mati muda.

The last or fourth stanza describes the author's longing for the essence of poetry and the life that it should be. Diction such as "sincerity," "self-confidence," "expressing love," "expressing care," "expressing respect," "expressing gratitude," "expressing forgiveness," and "expressing pity" represent important moral values in human relationships. The author emphasizes that if poetry loses its ability to express these values, then life becomes meaningless. In the context of the New Order, where many people feel oppressed by rigid social norms and restrictions on freedom of expression, this stanza shows the author's longing for authenticity and integrity in art. The principle that "it is better for me to die young" at the end of this stanza reaffirms that without noble human values, life becomes meaningless. This is a strong statement about the importance of maintaining integrity in work and maintaining human values amidst social challenges.

Discussion

The current study aimed to interpret the poem *Lebih Baik Mati Muda* by Remy Sylado through Schleiermacher's hermeneutic framework, focusing specifically on grammatical and psychological aspects to uncover deeper meanings. Findings indicate that Sylado strategically uses provocative diction, potent imagery, and recurring structural patterns to construct a profound critique of moral decay and authoritarianism during Indonesia's New Order regime. These grammatical elements, including repeated references to corruption, arbitrary power, and human rights abuses, are not simply descriptive as they function rhetorically to provoke reader empathy and reflection. This aligns closely with recent scholarship highlighting that linguistic deviations in poetry intensify affective engagement, facilitating a deeper empathic response toward depicted social injustices (Palmer, 2025; Herianah et al., 2024).

From the grammatical viewpoint, the poem's rhetorical construction emphasizes systemic moral failures through deliberate lexical repetition, anaphoric structures, and strategic sound devices. For instance, Sylado's intentional repetition of words like *kebusukan* (decay), *korupsi* (corruption), and *kesemenaan* (arbitrary dominance) not only underscores societal issues but also creates sonic resonance that heightens emotional response in readers. Herianah et al. (2024) have identified such sound patterns as typical of Mbeling poetry, highlighting their role in enhancing the persuasive impact of the text. Thus, the grammatical dimension in this poem emerges as both an aesthetic and political device, effectively conveying a powerful socio-critical message.

Psychologically, Sylado's repeated use of the first-person pronoun *aku* (I) embodies a deeper emotional state of disillusionment and moral urgency, reflecting the poet's despair at

societal conditions. Schleiermacher's psychological interpretation illuminates how Sylado positions himself not merely as an observer but as a moral agent deeply wounded by oppressive conditions. This psychological standpoint is consistent with recent research by Miller and Sibarani (2024), which asserts that Indonesian protest poetry of the New Order often involved embedding personal distress within broader narratives of collective struggle, thereby amplifying its socio-political resonance. Sylado's poem similarly transforms personal despair into collective resistance, epitomized by the recurrent declaration: *Lebih baik aku mati muda* (Better that I die young), suggesting that life under pervasive injustice is untenable.

Comparatively, this study complements existing scholarship by reinforcing and extending insights about the role of protest poetry in Indonesia. Sylado's Mbeling poetry, consistent with the broader corpus analyzed by Silalahi et al. (2022), strategically leverages colloquial language and vivid imagery to disrupt conventional poetic expectations and expose social and political injustices. Moreover, the hermeneutic approach adopted here demonstrates how such literature functions simultaneously at linguistic, cognitive, and emotional levels, thus aligning with the contemporary view of poetry as an empathic medium that profoundly impacts readers' moral and political sensibilities (Buchanan Palmer, 2025; Poetry & Brain Consortium, 2025).

In theoretical terms, the application of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics to Indonesian protest poetry represents a methodological innovation. Traditionally, hermeneutic approaches have been applied primarily to canonical or religious texts; thus, extending this method to a socially engaged literary genre expands its analytical utility. The integration of Schleiermacher's dual framework addressing both grammatical and psychological dimensions—enriches literary criticism by deepening our understanding of how poetry's formal and emotional structures interact to express complex socio-political positions.

Practically, these findings underscore poetry's value in educational contexts, specifically within critical literacy programs that prioritize social awareness and civic engagement. The demonstrated rhetorical effectiveness and emotional depth of Sylado's poem make it suitable as a teaching resource aimed at developing students' critical interpretative skills and moral reasoning. Policymakers and educators could leverage insights from this study to incorporate socially critical poetry into curricula, thereby fostering greater critical consciousness among students regarding issues of governance, corruption, and social justice.

Nevertheless, this study acknowledges several limitations. Firstly, the exclusive focus on a single poetic work restricts broader generalizations across the entire Mbeling genre or Indonesian protest poetry more generally. Secondly, while archival methods provided textual accuracy, interpreting authorial intention decades after publication remains inferential, thus necessitating cautious claims about historical motivations. Finally, the inherently subjective nature of hermeneutic interpretation may introduce researcher bias, despite mitigating efforts such as reflexivity and peer debriefing.

Considering these limitations, future research could extend this approach by examining multiple Mbeling texts or comparing Sylado's work with contemporary Indonesian protest poetry. Comparative studies involving poetry from different eras could further clarify the evolution of rhetorical and psychological strategies used by Indonesian poets to critique authority. Additionally, integrating multimodal approaches such as spoken poetry analysis or neurocognitive methodologies might offer fresh insights into how poetic forms engage readers on affective and cognitive levels. Inter-generational reception studies would also be valuable, investigating whether

contemporary youth audiences interpret and respond to historical protest poetry differently from previous generations.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated how Remy Sylado's poem *Lebih Baik Mati Muda* effectively embodies a profound socio-political critique of Indonesia's New Order era through the dual hermeneutic approach proposed by Schleiermacher. The grammatical analysis of the poem revealed how deliberate linguistic choices, such as provocative diction, anaphoric structures, and rhythmic repetition, functioned rhetorically to foreground moral and political decay. Simultaneously, the psychological interpretation provided deeper insights into the emotional and existential urgency communicated by the poet, particularly through the recurring motif of youthful self-sacrifice as symbolic resistance to systemic injustice.

Furthermore, by situating these findings within the broader scholarship on protest poetry and Mbeling poetics, this research has highlighted Sylado's innovative approach to literary dissent, reaffirming the critical role of poetic forms in articulating resistance and promoting social consciousness. Theoretically, the application of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics extended the analytical possibilities for interpreting protest poetry, illustrating the utility of grammatical and psychological analyses in uncovering layered textual meanings.

Practically, this study underscores poetry's potential as an educational tool for cultivating critical literacy and civic engagement among young readers, while also informing cultural and educational policy discussions about the importance of literature in fostering democratic awareness. Despite acknowledged limitations regarding generalizability and researcher subjectivity, these insights provide a foundation for further exploration, suggesting avenues for comparative, multimodal, and reception-based research.

Ultimately, *Lebih Baik Mati Muda* remains relevant as both a historical testament and a contemporary call to ethical reflection, exemplifying literature's enduring power to interrogate injustice, inspire empathy, and advocate meaningful social transformation.

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