

# Mantra or Nonmantra?: The Materialization of Language

**Seno Gumira Ajidarma**  
Jakarta Institute of Art

**Abstract** - *The credo of Sutardji Calzoum Bachri that as a poet liberated the word from the imposition of meaning, so that word would restore to the origin as mantra (1973), the sacred-mystical word without meaning from the ancient civilization, was never openly contested by any other poet from 1970s until today. However, in the introduction of his collected poems, Berlin Proposal (2015), Afrizal Malna speaks about the concept of mantra with another interpretation. For him there is a moment when meaning should retreat from language, because if meaning come inside language and seize the word, the word become mantra, like blood that is poured to the sign and becomes icon or myth. So if for Sutardji the empty meaning of word became the “positive” mantra, for Afrizal the mantra is “negative” as meaning seize the word to be a myth. The survey will connect the poems by these poets to their credos, and examine the meaning as an ideological struggle in culture.*

**Keywords:** *mantra, nonmantra, poetry, poem*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the year of 1973, with the publication of his collected poems, *O*, Sutardji Calzoum Bachri announce his famous poetry credo, which among other included these statements:

Words are not tools to deliver meaning. Words are not like a pipe to channel the water. Word is the meaning itself. Word is free.

If word is a chair, word is the chair itself, and not a tool to sit. If word is a knife, word is the knife itself, and not a tool to cut or to stab.

As a poet I only guards –as long as not disturb the freedom—in order to make the free presence (of word) as the maker of his own meaning, could have the maximum accentuation.

To write poem for me is to liberate words, that means restore word back to the origin. In the beginning is Word. And the first word is mantra. So to write poem for me is to restore word back to mantra.<sup>1</sup>

For a long periode, that means until today, the concept of this credo, that meaning could be took out from word, so that the rest is only an object without meaning except a word, never passed over. The only critical challenge is that the development of Bachri’s poems itself in the next publications like in the collection *Axe* (1979), precisely the word couldn’t be separated from the meaning.

However, after even Bachri himself couldn’t passed over that credo, the meaning of mantra finally contested. In the introduction of his collected poems, *Berlin Proposal* (2015), Afrizal Malna among other writes what he thought about mantra:

The very fundamental experience for the *retreat* of meaning from language. When meaning going inside language and seized the word, the word become “mantra” (like blood poured to a sign to become an icon or myth). To discover themselves as the power of meaning that dominate the consciousness of identity.<sup>2</sup>

So for Bachri to liberate word from the imposition of meaning would make the word as mantra is something progressive. While for Malna is quite the opposite, because for him mantra is the word with meaning that already exist as icon or myth, so that meaning should retreat from language. Could be conclude that if for Bachri mantra is “positive”, for Malna mantra is “negative”, but the action is just the same, that is to pull out meaning from the word.

How did the differences of their concept would make the difference of their works? At the same time, how the contestation of their work could be looked as a representation the cultural process? This brief survey will examine the concepts and consult their poems, to reconstruct the kind of ideological struggle that meet in the intersection of their statements.

<sup>1</sup> Sutardji Calzoum Bachri, *O Amuk Kapak* (1981), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Afrizal Malna, *Berlin Proposal* (2015), p. 9.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### a. *Conflicting Opinions.*

After the publication of *O* and then *Amok* (1976), besides the sensation of Bachri's style of poetry reading, his credo of poem analyzed by the scholars with a variable of opinions.

#### i. Teeuw: Traped by Liberation of Word.

For Teeuw, whatever the reason, word is a device. Word that is not a device then had no function, and lost the relevance. Word without meaning is not possible, because lost the characteristic as language, only become a sound. If there is a deviation, only possible because the existence of a code. An interpretation of deviation and rebellion only possible in relation and contrast with the subject that revolted—and in Teeuw's point of view Bachri do this. In contrast with the real mantra spoken by the shaman that shouldn't had any meaning for magical purpose, because the signification already build-in in the mantra's world, a poet should create his own mantra and in the deviation from everyday language he can't be not bounded in that language. If it is not, there is no effect. The irony of a modern poet that want to create mantra is that the world of signification should be build by himself, so that his mantra would be normalized and meaningful.<sup>3</sup>

#### ii. Dami N. Toda: The Arbitrary of Word and Meaning.

For Toda, a credo is like a pact, where the poet who writes the credo would try hard to be committed. So a poet's credo still had to be test again on the poem. A credo from a poet don't guarantee that his or her poem would be a perfect match of the concept, because on the process there could be surprises that invent the unpredictable. Bachri's credo itself could read from the process of innovation from a poet that want to be free from the existence of word as a device of meaning. People always think of word as a vehicle of language and not the autonomy of word as symbol, in this case not as symbol with fixed meaning, but an arbitrary symbol from a concrete meaning. Bachri's credo ask for the word as the meaning in itself and not other meaning as a connotation from the surrounding culture. Like the word *horse* for horse the animal alone and not from the meaning of horse for human being. In Toda's view, the concept of word by Teeuw is vulgar, while in Bachri's credo is more wide and total compare conventional definition.<sup>4</sup>

### b. *Umar Junus: Mantra and Mantra Poetry*

As Bachri and Malna are poets with an explicit declaration of what kind of poetry should they write, would be important to take a look of the concepts of mantra itself and mantra poetry, that beside the division should be interesting on what are the similarities or even the sameness too. The relation of mantra and mantra poetry in this case shouldn't be looked as just a coincident.

#### i. Mantra

In the dictionary, mantra described as (1) utterance with the magic power (to heal or make disaster, etc.) and (2) a composition of word with poetical elements (rhyme, rhytm) that considered contain magic power, which usually uttered by shaman to contest another magical power.<sup>5</sup> Umar Junus described it more as a non-rational endeavor, which persuade with language dispersal to make the mystery weak and then ended with a request that is more like an order.<sup>6</sup> More of this Malayan mantra concept, after the persuasion and the order, the magical power asked to serve. As a form, the mantra constituted to be poetical without using a unit of sentence but an expression of unit. What important in mantra is "the beauty of language", so the importance inside mantra is the concrete language element which is the sound.<sup>7</sup>

#### ii. Mantra Poetry

Mantra poetry is a poetry that sound like mantra, because in the poetry there is the essence of mantra like (1) persuasion and order; (2) using the expression unit; (3) makes importance of the beauty or the play of sound; (4) it's a totality that couldn't understood from the elements; (5) something that couldn't understood by human being, something mysterious; (6) there is an esoteric tendency or esoteric related from the words; (7) feels like only a play of sound. As these are the essence, to growth or develop in a poetry means that the essence only could be found with a kind of distilling method. What important to consider is the possibility to view the mantra poetry as not only a matter of style or technique of writing poetry.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> A. Teeuw, "Terikat dalam Pembebasan Kata" in *Tergantung Pada Kata* (1983 [1980]), p. 145-156.

<sup>4</sup> Dami N. Toda, "Puisi-puisi Luka Sutardji Calzoum Bachri" in *Hamba-Hamba Kebudayaan* (1984), p. 120-168.

<sup>5</sup> ....., *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (20..), p. ....

<sup>6</sup> Umar Junus, "Misteri dalam Mantra" in *Mitos dan Komunikasi* (1981), p. 229.

<sup>7</sup> Umar Junus, "Puisi yang Mantra di Indonesia: Suatu Interpretasi" in *Dari Peristiwa ke Imajinasi* (1983), p. 133.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

### III. METHOD

As the purpose of the survey is to trace the cultural process, that constitute each of the views from the two poets of mantra, the method of the survey is to compare the credos and the highlights of their poems as the process of continuation. However, the meaning of continuation in this case is not like a proper flow that seems like fittingly every time and every where, but should anticipate the possibilities of being contradictory or conflictual, as discontinuity is also an important aspect of a historical process. So after compare the credos with the poems as the results, the findings will be examine as an evaluation of the cultural condition.

### IV. MANTRA-EFFECT: THE SURVEY

#### a. *Bachri's Poetry: The Sound and The Look*

Frequently said above that the mantra-effect in Bachri's poem, when don't had any meaning because of the poet's act of liberation, would still had the rhythmic sound like this one.

**izukalizu**  
**mapakazaba itasatali**  
**tutulita**  
**papaliko arukabazaku kodega zuzukalibu**  
**tutukaliba dekodega zamzam lagotokoco**  
**zukuzangga zezezeze ze zukuzangga zege**  
**zezeze zukuzangga zezezeze zu**  
**kuzangga zezezeze aahh....!**<sup>9</sup>

This kind of mantra-effect, doesn't mention in the credo, become the discourse in every analysis of Bachri's poems, that what could be define as mantra which had no meaning is when the poem only gives reader a rhythmical sound. Of course the surveyor realize that the poem above only looked like a visual matter and not hear it as sound, except when spelling it like a mantra. For Bachri's mantra poetry, Toda underlined the existence of melody, rhythm, and repetition, as one of the reason why the poems were legitimate as mantra. What is not really explored, even mentioned one time by Toda about how Bachri carefully take attention on the look of his poem<sup>10</sup>, is the visual side from the existence of a written poem when it reads for the first time, like this one:

#### **kawin**

**kawin**

**kawin**

**kawin**

**kawin**

**ka**

**win**

**ka**

**win**

**ka**

**win**

**ka**

**win**

**ka**

**winka**

**winka**

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<sup>9</sup> Bachri, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>10</sup> Toda, *op.cit.*, p. 156.

**sihka**  
       **sihka**  
         **sihka**  
           **sih**  
           **ka**  
           **sih**  
           **ka**  
           **sih**  
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           **sih**  
           **sih**  
           **Ku**<sup>11</sup>

Bachri's poem, that only would present in the total appearance with sound as the same as a visual image, especially if without meaning, is an act of the materialization of language. When there is no word with any meaning, in the most radical representation of the concept, the communication could only rely on how the poem sounds and looked, so the language replaced by the material. What happened here is the materialization of language, because the poet already lost his faith of the linguistical language. With a view that modernization is not to look at the Western culture, but creatively developed the traditional mantra form and spirit, Bachri found his way to mantra poetry.<sup>12</sup>

*b. Malna's Poetry: Out of the Linguistic Box*

The discourse on Bachri's mantra poetry open a window to take a look on Malna's poetry in *Berlin Proposal*, where he said in the introduction:

I just experienced the **language's materialism aspects** when I stayed in a place where my language doesn't valid here, like a mirror which come back to the basic material as glass.

I began to go inside **the graphical space in language. To make word like a paint material** that could be mixed as sound or picture. /

.... The changing of art language to be media language through the material that is used, in art, cinema, or music. **There is no longer art language in themselves, except the material or the functionalized data.**<sup>13</sup>

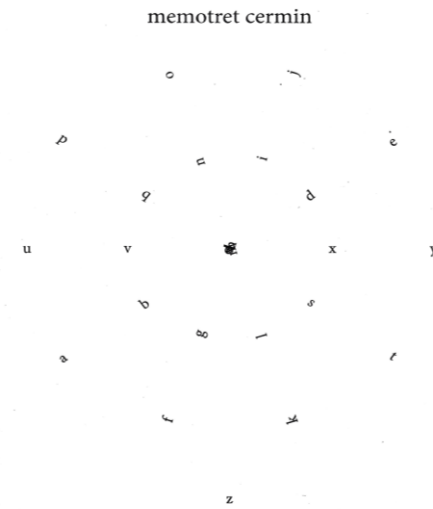
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<sup>11</sup> "Tragedi Winka & Sihakha" in Bachri, *op.cit.*, p. 38.

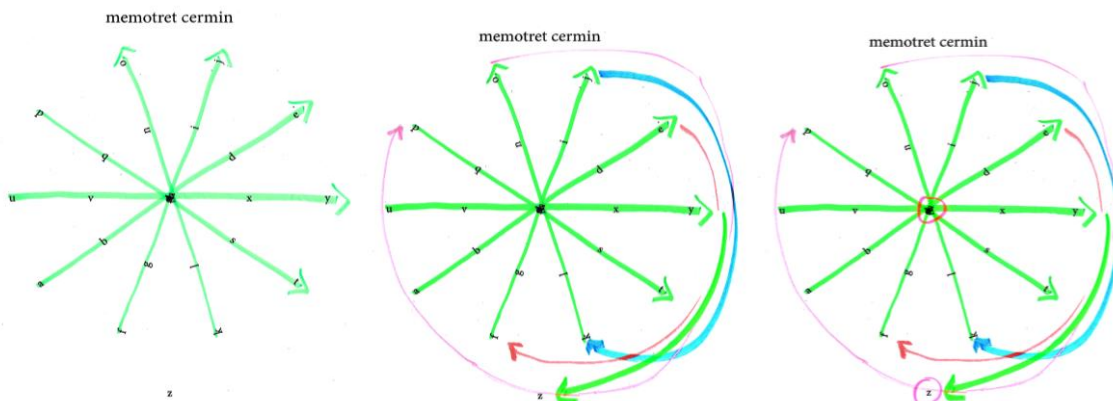
<sup>12</sup> Junus (1983), *op.cit.*, p. 137.

<sup>13</sup> "Catatan Moabit" in Malna, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

In *Berlin Proposal* not every poem is extremely graphical, but to find characters which is the smallest material unit from a written language as graphical system, like the poem below, will show that a system could be reconstructed creatively, still as a continuation, to a new one without denying the existence of the former system.



After tracing the old alphabet system that use in the poem, the interplay between the poem and the reader would show a movement that directed by the system.



**How a Poem Works**

Could be traced in this poem as a game that there is a (1) mode of direction; (2) mode of centralization; and (3) mode of marginalization. Why couldn't we say it's a power game? Something that so common as the mirror of culture itself. The poet confessed that:

I only live with Bahasa Indonesia. When I stay for almost 3 month in Berlin, I started to feel that the language which I use is losing their old interior walls, losing the meaning outside the language; losing the texture. In front of the public life order in Berlin which the system already established.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

From that background, about the established system is the most relevant point, as a cause of the loose language, but still leave the characters as the remaining ruins. The fact is, the remnants still had a system, the established system that is very familiar so that anybody could use it to compose their own construction.

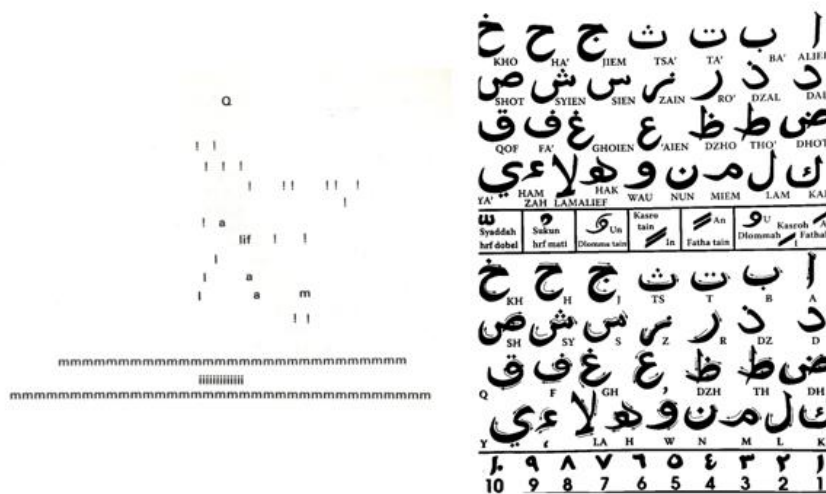
V. THE MIRROR OF CULTURAL PROCESS.

Toda taken Bachri's poems to be a response to a world of miscommunication.<sup>15</sup> In relation with mantra, with Teeuw and Junus, the three scholars all together agree, that this mantra inspired mantra-poetry showed how traditional culture react to be an answer for the tendency of power to seize meaning. In this case, the contestation of Malna's interpretation on mantra is not a coincident.

Culture represented as a hegemony process, among others, through language in communication. This language is not merely as a linguistic matter, but as part of the whole discourses of the ideological struggle<sup>16</sup>. Bachri's effort to liberate words had the results in mantra-poetry, as Junus define, even the poet want to make it as the real mantra, not to make it empty, but even without the meaning from dictionary, precisely deliver something powerful, as a word itself, as should happen with mantra. Teeuw said that there are only two possibilities would happen with Bachri's kind of mantra-poetry, does the language community going to be familiar and Indonesian literature need another rebellious poet, or just lost as a marginal fashion.

However, Malna's interpretation of mantra is quite the opposite, as he said that language should retreat from meaning, because if it is not would be a mantra as blood poured on icon or myth. The "positive" concepts of mantra by Bachri contested with the "negative" concept by Malna, not coincidentally because of loosing bahasa in Germany, but that in Indonesian literary scene Bachri's credo of the liberated word from 1973 become a monument of domination. Even Malna wrote a poem titled "Bachri The Sun" in 1984 which it says: *Your drunk brought the poet to the heartache of dictionaries.*<sup>17</sup> The language crisis is the crisis of humanity.

As the hegemony process would invite the subordinate to resist, that's what happen with the interpretation of mantra. Anyway, does the process really conflictual as could be seen from this comparative display?

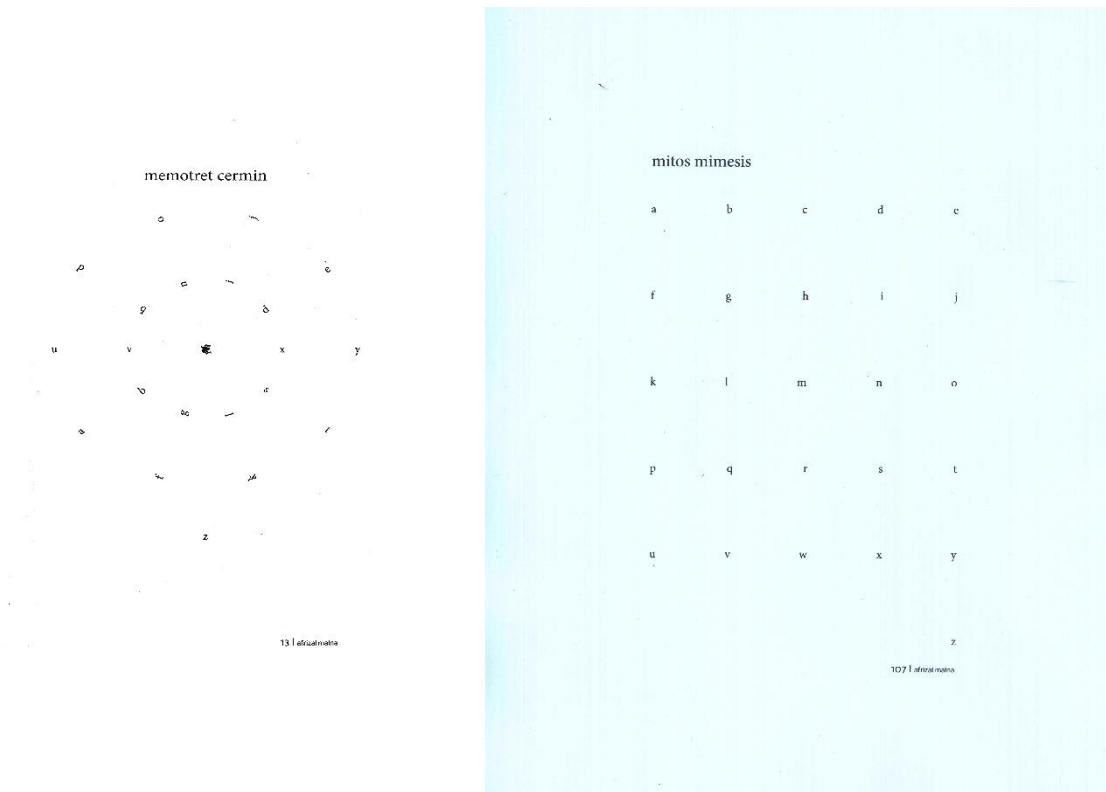


Bachri's Poem and the source

<sup>15</sup> Toda, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> Tim O'Sullivan et al., *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies* (1994), p. 68-71.

<sup>17</sup> "Matahari Bachri" in Afrizal Malna, *Abad yang Berlari* (1984), p. 26.



Malna's Poem and the source

From 1973 to 2015, it seems like the problem is still the same. The dominant discourse or the mainstream looked as stagnant culture, challenging language expression to find another way of telling as also resist the discourse that is in power. Not only as a resistance to the language but also to Bachri's credo if not the mantra-poetry. The foundation of the two poem by two Indonesian poets from the same language in different time and place, is just the same established factors to be blamed while being the cause of the new creation: the materialization of language.

The dominant discourse that is going to be established at the same time should negotiate the discourse of the subordinate group, so that the hegemony process which always represent as the contemporary culture would flow in a very high social consensus to keep compromise equilibrium of society.<sup>18</sup> With this case is interesting to always draw a perspective on culture, trace the factors that will generate the movements, that actually could detected from everyday life as well, where traditional and modern culture incorporate and resist each other in the postmodern condition.

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<sup>18</sup> John Storey, "Hegemony" in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2009), p. 79-82.

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