

## EX NIHILO IN AJIDARMA'S SHORT STORY "KERONCONG PEMBUNUHAN"

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### Abstract

This study delves into how *ex nihilo*—a radical departure from the usual order—manifests in Seno Gumira Ajidarma's short story "*Keroncong Pembunuhan*," drawing on Slavoj Žižek's theory. In this research, the authors conducted a detailed examination of the main character's moments of crisis and rebellion, revealing that these disruptions transcend personal struggles. Rather, they emerge as significant acts of protest against the societal norms and regulations that exert influence over individual identity and behavior. The analysis does not stop at the story itself, as it also draws on Ajidarma's background, highlighting parallels between the marksman's crisis of conscience and the author's real-life struggles with authority during Indonesia's New Order Era. Unlike earlier studies that primarily examined inner conflicts or moral dilemmas, this research distinguishes itself by employing Žižek's ideas to illustrate how radical subjectivity and novel forms of resistance emerge in a contemporary Indonesian novel. The findings demonstrate how *ex nihilo* becomes a tool for expressing agency and dissent, opening up new ways to consider the connections between literature, ideology, and politics. This study concludes by encouraging further research on Žižek's theories in the context of Indonesian writing, suggesting how stories can challenge power and envision new forms of subjectivity in the aftermath of authoritarianism.

**Keywords:** *ex nihilo*, Žižek, radical subjectivity, Ajidarma, Indonesian short story.

### INTRODUCTION

In today's literary studies, the question of how people form their sense of self—and how they challenge the status quo—keeps on emerging. Scholars are increasingly turning to psychoanalysis and philosophy to make sense of how literature both reflects and shapes the world in which we live (Hallward, 2003; Johnston, 2019). One theory that is garnering considerable attention is Slavoj Žižek's concept of *ex nihilo*. In simple terms, it is the moment when a person completely breaks away from rules and societal expectations. It is

a bold, total rupture—almost like hitting the reset button on your identity, as explained by Johnston (2019) and Sharpe (2010).

Žižek's take on radical subjectivity—meaning those rare, authentic actions that emerge from “nothingness”—offers a unique lens for exploring how people resist dominant ideas, making his theory especially interesting when examining literature from places with a complex political history. For example, it is particularly useful when analyzing stories that deal with rebellion or resistance, such as those found in post-authoritarian contexts (Sharpe, 2010).

According to Žižek, what sparks truly rebellious or radical actions is something he calls *ex nihilo*. This is essentially the point at which a person breaks away from everything outside themselves and steps outside the usual social rules—what he refers to as the “symbolic order”. He argues that what people often call “evil” or rebellious does not only regard making a conscious choice to do wrong; instead, these actions come from a much deeper, often unconscious place—a decision people make before they are even aware of it, as stated by Žižek (2008).

Therefore, many of the things that society deems good or bad actually stem from the rules and expectations inherent in the symbolic order. Radical actions contradict these norms and challenge the foundations of what is considered acceptable. In Žižek's terms, a truly radical act is one where a person makes a decision that is not shaped by outside pressures or social expectation, but rather comes from a sudden, personal break—a moment of *ex nihilo* (Žižek, 2008). Therefore, radical actions are often perceived as criminal acts. However, essentially, in those acts, the subject is in an absent position (the subject can influence but cannot be influenced), which later gives rise to what is called an “authentic subject”.

To truly understand what makes radical acts so meaningful, it is essential to examine how individuals recognize and respond to the ideologies that shape their perspectives. This investigation can provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of perception and reaction in relation to various ideological frameworks. This means tracing the shift from simply going along with society's rules to a more knowing, even naive consciousness, where, as Marx and Žižek point out, people might see through these systems but still participate in them. Naive consciousness is a well-known term in Marx's classical ideas, which emphasizes that it is formulated as “they do not know, but they are doing it”. If we present the current state of affairs, this is no longer the case. In Žižek's perspective (1994), cynical awareness actually arises from “They know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it”. Žižek in Setiawan (2016) states that the pattern of cynicism that exists is when people think that they are making fun of the controlling ideology, but in fact, they are actually contributing to strengthening the grip of that ideology over themselves.

Later on, Žižek views ideological fantasy as a set of shared illusions that replace what is truly real in people's lives. Instead of allowing people to truly connect with reality, these fantasies shape their perceptions of the world and influence their day-to-day actions, often without even realizing it. Even when people know the truth, they often continue to act as

if the illusion is real, because that is what makes their social world feel stable and familiar. So, the pursuit of what is truly real is hindered by these deep-seated fantasies, which quietly shape people's relationship with everything around them, as explained by Žižek (2008).

Although Slavoj Žižek's theoretical frameworks have the potential to provide significant insights into Indonesian literature, particularly in relation to the works of Seno Gumira Ajidarma, a notable lack of scholarly engagement in this area remains. This gap suggests a need for further exploration of Žižekian concepts as a means of enriching the understanding of Ajidarma's literary contributions. Ajidarma is a writer who dives deep into social reality, resistance, and personal identity—themes that fit perfectly with Žižek's framework. The author is recognized for his impactful storytelling that critiques contemporary issues in Indonesia. His notable works include *Saksi Mata* (Eye Witness), a collection of short stories; *Jazz, Parfum, dan Insiden* (Jazz, Perfumes, and Incidents), a novel; and *Ketika Jurnalisme Dibungkam, Sastra Harus Bicara* (When Journalism Silenced, Literature Must Speak), a collection of essays. Collectively, these texts form a trilogy that addresses the violence and unrest in Timor Timur (now Timor-Leste) during its period of Indonesian governance.

*Penembak Misterius* (The Mysterious Marksman) is a notable collection of short stories that critically explores the political climate during Indonesia's New Order period (from 1966 to 1998, during the reign of the second Indonesian president, Soeharto). Focusing on the enigmatic shootings of the 1980s, the narratives address themes of state violence and societal response, offering a pointed critique of authoritarian governance and its lasting impact on collective memory. One story in this book, "*Keroncong Pembunuhan* (The Murder *Keroncong*)," centers on a contract killer whom a woman and a boss hire to shoot someone at a party. The target and the mastermind are both at the same lively *keroncong* (old-fashioned Indonesian music) event, creating a tense mix of celebration and danger.

This marksman must aim at his target from the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of the hotel, where the shooting target is located. However, in the midst of carrying out his duties (i.e., when he had to shoot at a predetermined target), this marksman actually began to question who the real target of his shooting was, as opposed to the woman guiding his task. It was the first time he had questioned the contract he had received. To find out who ordered him, the marksman threatened the woman who acted as the mediator. The story ends with the marksman aiming his rifle and the crosshairs of the telescope at the heart of a devious, deceitful-looking man who is also his hirer.

Recent scholarship on Ajidarma's "*Keroncong Pembunuhan*" demonstrates a multifaceted approach to understanding the short story's psychological and moral complexity. Mohamad (2019) employs Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic framework to analyze the internal conflict experienced by the main character, namely the marksman, as he grapples with the task of killing a target upon the order of a mysterious woman. Through the lens of Id, Ego, and Superego, the study reveals that the marksman's hesitation is rooted in both internal and external factors, highlighting a profound struggle

between professional duty and personal conscience. The analysis identifies a progressive plot structure that intensifies the protagonist's psychological turmoil, culminating in his rebellion against the command and a pivotal shift in his moral alignment.

In a different vein, Tombeng et al. (2024) examine "*Keroncong Pembunuhan*" through the lens of moral values and its implications for literature learning in secondary education. Their qualitative descriptive study identifies key moral values embedded in the narrative, such as perseverance, patience, empathy, and responsibility. The researchers argue that these values, as manifest in the marksman's actions and dilemmas, are highly relevant to character education and can be effectively integrated into the high school literature curriculum. This approach underscores the story's dual function as both a vehicle for social critique and a means of fostering moral reflection among students. It also highlights the complexity of "*Keroncong Pembunuhan*" as a literary text, inviting diverse interpretations that encompass psychological analysis, as well as moral and educational implications.

Lately, a noticeable trend has emerged in literary and translation studies: an increasing number of researchers are turning to Slavoj Žižek's ideas about psychoanalysis and ideology, particularly in relation to topics such as violence, identity, and the retelling of stories. Cahyadi et al., (2025) analyze the complexities involved in translating violent scenes in Leila S. Chudori's "*Laut Bercerita*" (translated into "*The Sea Speaks His Name*"). Using Žižek's breakdown of violence (subjective, systemic, and symbolic), they find that translators often make changes—softening or omitting intense or taboo moments—to accommodate what new readers can handle. Meanwhile, the original story is packed with subjective violence. This research effectively demonstrates how Žižek's theories can reveal hidden ideologies in Indonesian fiction, clarifying how translation is not merely about exchanging words—it is about reshaping trauma and meaning as stories cross languages and cultures.

Žižek's influence is not limited to translation as other researchers are using his theories to explore how power, ideology, and personal identity are expressed in both Indonesian and world literature. Take Merdika (2021), for instance; who used Žižek's ideas about the symbolic order and ideological fantasy to analyze Arafat Nur's novel entitled "*Burung Terbang di Kelam Malam* (Birds Flying in the Darkness of Night)". Merdika reveals that characters who attempt to rebel against the system or large social forces (what Žižek calls the "Big Other") often end up in new traps, especially in the context of Aceh's post-conflict society. This lines up with Žižek's point that breaking out of ideology is harder than it seems.

On a global note, a study done by Bristow (2017) entitled *Toilet Humour and Ecology on the First Page of Finnegans Wake: Žižek's Call of Nature, Answered by Joyce* takes Žižek's framework and runs with it. The authors explore how bodily functions, natural themes, and cultural taboos are all present on the novel's first page. By incorporating Žižek's brand of psychoanalysis, they demonstrate that what might seem like simple jokes or nods to nature are, in fact, clues to deeper anxieties, both ideological and ecological. In

other words, this study proves that Žižek's theories are not just for abstract philosophy—they are flexible tools for exploring modernist literature. Even the humorous or unusual details in Joyce's writing can reveal a great deal about society's hidden concerns and how we perceive the world.

Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the depiction of *ex nihilo* in Ajidarma's short story "Keroncong Pembunuhan," situating it within Žižek's psychoanalytic theory. By doing so, it aims to contribute to both Žižekian literary criticism and the understanding of how Indonesian writers use narrative to stage moments of radical subjectivity and ideological protest. Most research on Ajidarma's work has focused on topics such as inner struggles, moral questions, translation methods, or broad ideological debates. However, there is a gap—no one has really examined how ideas like *ex nihilo* (creating from nothing) and making a total break from established rules are presented in his stories.

This study steps in to fill that gap by exploring Žižek's concept of *ex nihilo* and examining its application in modern Indonesian literature. By zooming in on these sudden moments of change and characters taking charge, this research uncovers new layers in how these stories are told. It also shows that Žižek's theories are not just confined to Western philosophy—they actually align surprisingly well with Indonesian writing. As an area that scholars have overlooked, this study opens up new ground for discussion.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research draws on Slavoj Žižek's ideas about subjectivity and the concept of *ex nihilo*. It leans on Žižek's theories about how people form their identities and make bold breaks from tradition, what he calls "*ex nihilo*." The process consists of the following steps: *First*, the story is given a careful read to determine who the main characters are and how they navigate through the real, symbolic, and imaginary layers of experience. Then, the study focuses on the points where the protagonist steps outside the usual rules, marking those key moments of *ex nihilo* and situating them within the larger story. Ultimately, by connecting the dots and examining why the character acts as they do, this research aligns with Žižek's ideas about radical actions and the fantasies that drive them.

The authors applied this method as it was grounded in what has worked for other researchers in the past. For example, Merdika (2021) employed Žižek's lens to examine a different Indonesian story, while another study applied similar theories to uncover the hidden structures in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. These examples give this study a strong foundation and help guide each step, from reading the text closely to interpreting those radical moments. By adhering to this method, this research provides a deeper examination of how the concepts of *ex nihilo* and radical subjectivity are actually manifested in "Keroncong Pembunuhan."

Alongside a close reading of the story that serves as the research object, this research also delves into what is known about Ajidarma's life and career. The study compiles information from interviews, biographies, journalistic pieces, and academic sources to paint a fuller picture of Ajidarma's background—his personal history, the society he is

part of, and his involvement in political and cultural debates. These details serve as supporting evidence, enabling the researcher to compare the events in the story with the author's real-world views and experiences.

By juxtaposing Ajidarma's life with the patterns revealed through Žižek's theory, the study highlights how the author's own beliefs and experiences are reflected in (or diverge from) the narrative and its characters. This method strengthens the analysis because it does not merely examine the text in isolation—it connects the story to the author's world. It incorporates psychoanalytic ideas, demonstrating how all these elements work together to shape meaning.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Radical Act in the “*Keroncong Pembunuhan*” Short Story by Seno Gumira Ajidarma.

In the “*Keroncong Pembunuhan*” short story, a marksman is portrayed as strictly adhering to the rules governing his profession, his contractual obligations, and the directives issued by those in authority. At first, he goes through the motions, carrying out what is expected of him without much thought. However, things start to change when he pays closer attention to his intended victim. Suddenly, doubts creep in. He begins to wonder about who this person really is and what their story might be. This is when cracks appear in his usual way of thinking—he feels empathy, hesitates, and the certainty he has starts to fall apart.

This hesitation is not random. It is his response to coming face-to-face with something real and unsettling—something that rules or routines cannot explain away. As he notices just how human his target is, compassion and uncertainty begin to grow within him. Žižek would call this a moment of *ex nihilo*—when a character breaks away from social scripts and acts from a place that is not ruled by the usual expectations. So, when the marksman starts questioning, holding back, and even thinking of turning his violence elsewhere, it is not just rebellion for rebellion's sake. Rather, it emerges from a profound confrontation with the Real, a traumatic encounter that disrupts the symbolic order and compels him toward radical subjectivity.

In this short story, it is essential to initially identify the subject. In this case, the researcher identifies the marksman who has made transactions with his hirer as the subject. Symbolic representations can be found in contracts that must be complied with, including the hirer and the woman who will guide the marksman. The quotes are as follows:

“...Wanita bersuara halus yang memerintahku itu pun tentu cantik. Aku tak mengira seorang wanita akan terlibat dalam pembunuhan semacam ini.

“Siapa sasaranku?” tanyaku minggu lalu, ketika dia memesan penembakan ini. Dilakukan lewat telepon seperti itu, tentu wajahnya hanya bisa kukira-kira saja.

“Kau tidak perlu tahu, ini bagian dari kontrak kita”.

Kontrak semacam ini memang sering terjadi. Aku dibayar hanya untuk menembak, siapa yang jadi sasaran bukanlah urusanku” (Ajidarma, 1999).

*"...The soft-voiced woman who ordered me must certainly be beautiful. I never imagined a woman would be involved in a murder like this.*

*'Who is my target?' I asked last week when she ordered the shooting. Since it was done over the phone, I could only guess at her face.*

*'You do not need to know; this is part of our contract.'*

*Contracts like this happen often. I am paid only to shoot; who the target is is not my business"* (Ajidarma, 1999).

Based on the framework that Žižek offers, the process of interpreting the subject involves a symbolic efficiency mechanism, which is defined as a process or structure that functions as a benchmark, providing status and identity for the subject. That mechanism works to verify everything and then arrange and attach it to the subject, as stated by Robet (2010, p. 34). Researchers can find this in the contract that has been agreed upon by the marksman and the hirer. Contracts and hirers have the supremacy of dictating things, labeling things, and granting status to others as a marksman. It can be seen in the following quote:

*"Agak tegang juga aku menunggu perintah menembak. Itulah repotnya selalu bekerja berdasarkan kontrak. Tidak bisa seenaknya sendiri. Aku dibayar untuk mengarahkan garis silang teleskop senapanku pada tempat yang paling mematikan, untuk kemudian menarik pelatuknya (Ajidarma, 1999).*

*"I was tense waiting for the order to shoot. That is the trouble with always working on a contract. I cannot just do as I please. I am paid to line up my rifle's crosshairs on the deadliest spot, and then pull the trigger"* (Ajidarma, 1999).

On the other side, for the first time in the marksman's life, after observing his target through his telescope, he thinks about who and what the background of his target is.

*"Dari balik teleskop ini, wajah-wajah memunculkan pesonanya sendiri, yang berbeda dibanding dengan bila kita berhadapan langsung dengan orangnya. Ia tak banyak bicara, namun tampaknya ia harus menjawab banyak pertanyaan. Dan aku merasa bahwa ia sangat hati-hati menjawab, wajahnya menunjukkan niat bersopan santun yang tidak menyebalkan. Apakah yang akan terjadi kalau ia kutembak nanti? Aku teringat Ninoy di Filipina... Tapi aku tidak tahu politik. Jadi, sambil menatap wajah yang akan berlubang itu, aku berpikir tentang yang lain. Mungkin ia punya istri, punya anak. Bahkan kupikir ia pun pantas punya cucu. Mereka akan bertanggung setelah mendengar kematian orang ini, dan tangis itu akan makin menjadi-jadi ketika mengetahui cara kematiannya. Biar saja. Bukankah ia seorang pengkhianat bangsa dan negara? Ia pantas mendapatkan hukumannya"* (Ajidarma, 1999).

*"Through this telescope, faces have their charm, different from when we meet people face to face. He does not talk much, but it seems he has to answer many questions. Moreover, I feel that he answers very carefully, his face showing an intention to be polite without being annoying. What will happen if I shoot him later? I remember Ninoy in the Philippines..."*

*However, I am not familiar with politics. So, while staring at the face that would soon have a hole in it, I thought about other things. Maybe he has a wife and children. I even thought he deserved to have grandchildren. They would cry after hearing of this man's death, and their weeping would grow even more when they learned how he died. So be it. Is he not a traitor to the nation and state? He deserves his punishment" (Ajidarma, 1999).*

This "thinking" moment prompts the marksman to question the true reality. In this case, the researcher classifies that it is the *ex nihilo* point of the subject. The marksman had various feelings of turmoil regarding the man he was shooting at.

This moment evokes feelings of compassion. However, at this stage, the marksman has not yet experienced his full potential. It can be seen from the sentence "*Biar saja. Bukankah ia seorang pengkhianat bangsa dan negara? Ia pantas mendapatkan hukumannya.*" ("So be it. Is he not a traitor to the nation and state? He deserves his punishment.") Here arises what Žižek calls a cynical consciousness. The marksman begins to cloud his "thinking" moments by bringing up the information the mediator gave him before he agreed to the contract. The information is an illusion that keeps the marksman at an arm's length from reality.

The *ex-nihilo* moment facilitates a process of exploration in which the subject engages with the pre-existing reality. This phenomenon prompts a reflective inquiry into the nature of that reality, fostering an enhanced understanding of its complexities and underlying structures. This situation can be found when the mediator snaps at the marksman; he exerts all his senses and tries to trace all the women present at the party. The *keroncong* song serves as a clue that helps the marksman find his mediator.

*"Tembaklah dia sekarang," ujarinya pelan dalam head-phone-ku, dan kulihat dari teleskop dia memang berkata sendiri. Rupanya betul dia. Ia mendengar lewat giwang dan berbicara padaku lewat mikrofon yang bersembunyi dalam leontin kalungnya. Leontin yang indah, terpanjang di dadanya yang tipis" (Ajidarma, 1999).*

*"'Shoot him now,' she said quietly in my headphones, and through the telescope I saw she really was talking to herself. It really was her. She was listening through her earring and talking to me through a microphone hidden in her necklace pendant. Such a beautiful pendant, displayed on her thin chest" (Ajidarma, 1999).*

The *ex nihilo* moment occurs when the marksman looks into the target's eyes and realizes that the symbolic order has reached its limit. What is meant by symbolic limitations here is the inability of the mediator to provide answers to the various questions resulting from the marksman's *ex nihilo*.

*"...Dan aku menatap mata orang itu. Astaga. Benarkan dia seorang pengkhianat?*

*"Kau tidak keliru? Benarkah ia seorang pengkhianat?"*

*"Tidak usah tanya-tanya, tembak sekarang!"*

*Aku menatap lagi matanya, pengkhianat yang bagaimana?*

*"Pengkhianat yang bagaimana? Kenapa tidak diadili saja?"*

*"Apa urusanmu tolong? Tembak dia sekarang atau kontrak kubatalkan!"*



*Perasaan aneh tiba-tiba merasuki diriku. Aku malah mengarahkan senapanku pada wanita itu," (Ajidarma, 1999).*

*"...And I looked into that man's eyes. My God. Is he really a traitor?  
'Are you sure? Is he really a traitor?'  
'Do not ask questions, shoot now!'  
I looked into his eyes again. What kind of traitor?  
'What kind of traitor? Why not just put him on trial?'  
'What is it to you, idiot? Shoot him now, or I will cancel the contract!'  
A strange feeling suddenly overcame me. Instead, I aimed my rifle at the woman" (Ajidarma, 1999).*

As explained in the theoretical framework, this *ex nihilo* triggers the radical acts of the subject. In this short story, one of the marksman's radical acts is to point the gun at his mediator. He keeps on questioning who and what his target's wrongdoing is. Moreover, a marksman seems capable of saying that he does not want to shoot innocent people when he reaches the *ex nihilo* point.

*"Dalam teleskop kulihat wajahnya mendongak ke arahku dengan kaget.  
"Katakan padaku," kataku lagi, "Apa kesalahan orang itu?"  
"Tembak dia sekarang tolol, atau kamu akan mati!"  
"Justru kamu yang bisa segera mati."  
"Omong kosong! Kamu tidak tahu di mana aku."  
"Kamu memakai cheongsam dengan belahan di paha, kamu ada di belakang orkes."  
Dan kulihat wajahnya menjadi pucat.  
"Kamu sudah melanggar kontrak."  
"Aku tidak menembak orang yang tidak bersalah."  
"Itu bukan urusanmu, tahun lalu kamu menembaki ribuan orang itu!"  
"Itu urusanku sendiri, katakan cepat apa kesalahan orang itu!" (Ajidarma, 1999)*

*"Through the telescope, I saw her face look up at me in shock.  
'Tell me,' I said again, 'what did that man do wrong?'  
'Shoot him now, idiot, or you will die!'  
'You are the one who could die soon.'  
'Nonsense! You do not know where I am.'  
'You are wearing a cheongsam with a slit at the thigh, you are behind the orchestra.'  
Moreover, I saw her face turn pale.  
'You have broken the contract.'  
'I do not shoot innocent people.'  
'That is not your business, last year you shot thousands of people!'  
'That was my own business, now tell me quickly what that man's crime is!'" (Ajidarma, 1999).*

The marksman's radical act not only aims to expose the target's mistake but also threatens the mediator to reveal who the mastermind of the contract and shooting transaction is. The marksman, who in fact only has to kill according to an agreed contract, finally talks about innocent people, asks the reason for the murder, and threatens the person who guides him to shoot, out of his curiosity regarding the mastermind behind it all.

*"Aku ingin tahu, apakah semua itu merupakan alasan yang cukup untuk membunuhnya?"*

*"Itu bukan urusanmu. Ini politik".*

*"Urusanku adalah leontinmu manis, ia bisa pecah berantakan oleh peluruku, dan peluru itu tak akan berhenti di situ."*

*Wajah itu kembali menatap ke arahku dengan pandangan menghiba.*

*"Jangan tembak aku! Aku tidak tahu apa-apa!"*

*"Leontinmu manis..."*

*"Ah, jangan, jangan tembak! Please..."*

*"Siapa?"*

*"Aku bisa celaka."*

*"Sekarang pun kamu bisa celaka. Kuhitung sampai tiga. Satu..."*

*"Kamu gila, kamu merusak segala-galanya".*

*"Dua..."* *"Hmm, alangkah gugupnya dia."*

*"Ia ada di depan orang yang harus kamu tembak".*

*"Berkacamata?"*

*"Ya" (Ajidarma, 1999).*

*"I want to know, is all that really a good enough reason to kill him?"*

*"That is none of your business. This is politics."*

*'My business is your pretty pendant; it could shatter into pieces from my bullet, and that bullet will not stop there.'*

*That face looked at me again with a pleading look.*

*'Do not shoot me! I do not know anything!'*

*'Your pretty pendant...'*

*'No, do not shoot! Please...'*

*'Who?'*

*'I could be in danger.'*

*'You could be in danger right now. I will count to three. One...'*

*'You are crazy, you are ruining everything.'*

*'Two...'* *Hmm, how nervous she is.*

*'He is in front of the man you are supposed to shoot.'*

*'Is he wearing glasses?'*

*'Yes,'"* (Ajidarma, 1999).

This short story concludes with the marksman pointing a gun at the older man, who recounts the fiery tale with a sly and deceitful expression on his face. The marksman also aimed the crosshairs of his gun telescope at the heart of the old man, who, as he spoke,

had his hand moving back and forth, clenching, and pounding his fist against the palm of the other. A series of radical acts carried out by the marksman (asking the reason for the murder, threatening the mediator, wanting to know who the mastermind of the contract is, and pointing the gun at his hirer) begins with the presence of an *ex nihilo* (thinking process) in him because the symbolic order has reached its limitations.

Within Slavoj Žižek's framework, the marksman's act of questioning his target can be understood as a radical response to a departure from the symbolic order. This highlights the complexities of agency and subjectivity in relation to transgressing established norms. The so-called *ex nihilo* triggered this radical action. It is defined as the moment of separation of the subject from 'things that are outside of him'.

### **The Subjectivity of Seno Gumira Ajidarma through the Act of Writing "*Keroncong Pembunuhan*"**

In understanding *ex nihilo*, one examines the sense of compulsion—what drives someone to break away from rules and expectations. In *Keroncong Pembunuhan*, the marksman's hesitation and eventual rebellion clearly come from intense pressure; he is obligated by contract to carry out a murder without truly understanding why or being able to justify it morally. As the symbolic structures and justifications around him collapse, this forced scenario grows unbearable, driving him toward extreme resistance.

Interestingly, Ajidarma experienced something similar in real life. As a writer and journalist under an authoritarian regime, he faced constant pressures that limited free expression and forced ideological conformity. Much like the marksman in his story, Ajidarma reached a breaking point where he could no longer continue conforming to imposed rules, prompting him toward bold literary expression as a form of resistance.

Žižek's theory helps clarify that compulsion matters because it forces individuals into a confrontation with the inherent limitations of the symbolic order, resulting in a traumatic collision with reality—the Real. Whether it is the marksman's forced contract or Ajidarma's imposed censorship, this sense of compulsion is key. It drives people toward radical actions, allowing genuine subjectivity to emerge from moments of profound symbolic crisis.

The concept of *ex nihilo* in this narrative transcends a mere plot twist; it is intricately linked to Ajidarma's life experiences and the historical context in which he existed. During Indonesia's New Order era, Ajidarma served as a journalist and writer, navigating a complex landscape characterized by stringent censorship, systemic state violence, and pervasive pressures to conform to governmental narratives. His work often positioned him in direct opposition to those in power, particularly in instances where his reporting unveiled the detrimental effects of state repression. This conflict highlights the challenges faced by media practitioners in authoritarian regimes, underscoring the critical role of journalism in advocating for transparency and accountability amid oppressive circumstances (Steele, 2005).

Ajidarma's determination to keep writing—even after being banned or threatened—shows his real-life *ex nihilo*: a breakaway from the strict rules and expectations forced on him by the regime. By giving his marksman protagonist a crisis of conscience, Ajidarma is not just telling a story; he is acting out his resistance to militarism and abuse of authority. This overlap between the events in the story and the author's own experiences enables us to view the protagonist's radical decisions as a reflection of Ajidarma's struggle for freedom and authenticity within a harsh system, as explained by Foulcher (2008).

In this way, the story blends personal, historical, and psychological aspects, connecting the text with the real struggles of its creator. It grounds the analysis in both the events of the narrative and the lived reality behind the words. Since his childhood, Ajidarma had indeed been a different figure from his parents. His father was a professor at the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, Gadjah Mada University, while his mother was a medical internist. His childhood, from elementary to junior high, was marked by disobedience and rebellion against the rules at his school. Moreover, when he was in junior high school, he did not want to continue his education and preferred going on adventures. According to Haq (2004), this preference stemmed from his inspiration from the adventure story of Old Shatterhand in the Apache jungle by German author Karl May, which led him to wander in search of experience.

As stated above, Ajidarma's behavior which is often classified as rebellion and defiance is interpreted differently through Žižek's lens. In Žižek's framework, such actions are viewed not as acts of defiance but as efforts to engage in the pursuit of the Real. However, during his odyssey from junior high school to West Java Province and then to Sumatra Island, Anindita (2016) wrote that he was unable to overcome the limitations of the symbolic order until he finally found theater and W. S. Rendra, a famous Indonesian poet. For Ajidarma, writing became his passion as it is a means to be free. In an interview with Febrina Anindita for a Whiteboard Journal page in collaboration with the Ubud Writers & Readers Festival, Ajidarma revealed that when he was banned from writing for leaking news in East Timor (now known as Timor Leste), he continued to write and made his work immortal. His trilogy entitled *Saksi Mata* (a collection of short stories); *Jazz, Parfum, dan Insiden* (romance); and *Ketika Jurnalisme Dibungkam, Sastra Harus Bicara* (a collection of essays) is clear evidence of how Ajidarma continued to fight even though at that time he was prohibited from writing and working.

Žižek's opinion about film and literature is an attempt by the director/author to seek the Real when he realizes there is a deficiency in the Symbolic. Ajidarma's works are not only a form of cynicism about the prevailing ideology, but it can be proven by his persistence in continuing to write and create despite prohibitions from various parties. In fact, he was even temporarily dismissed as editor of the Jakarta-Jakarta magazine because the magazine covered the Dili massacre (Santa Cruz Cemetery) on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1991 (Foulcher, 2008).

From Žižek's perspective, Ajidarma's act of writing is a radical act caused by the limitations of the symbolic order in his search for the Real. Thus, it can be seen that

Ajidarma's subjectivity, as expressed through the act of writing "*Keroncong Pembunuhan*," is not only to reproduce the social reality that occurred but also as a form of protest against the militarist ideology that developed during the New Order regime.

Ajidarma's persistence in writing in both the fields of journalism and literature to this day is proof that his search for Real is always ongoing. His rejection of the 2012 Achmad Bakrie (PAB) Award from the Freedom Institute, in which Ajidarma was judged to be able to use the logic of fairy tales to state various current Indonesian problems, is also one way to avoid what Žižek said is a cynical consciousness which is a product of ideological fantasy which hinders the attainment of the subject on what is the Real.

As reported on the BBC Indonesia online page, Ajidarma in an interview with Heyder Affan answered questions related to his rejection of the 2012 Achmad Bakrie Award (PAB) with the following statement:

*"Ada kalanya," ujarnya dengan mimik serius, dunia politik menyentuh kita, sehingga saya atau kita harus bersikap..."*

*Sebagai seorang penulis, lanjutnya, pilihan bertapa di wilayah bernama menara gading, tidak dapat berlangsung selama-lamanya.*

*Ada keputusan saya harus turun (dari menara gading). Ada titik tertentu tidak bisa menghindar lagi (dari politik). Sehingga (aktivitas melalui) tulisan saja, tidak cukup..."* paparnya. ("Tokoh: Seno Gumira Ajidarma," 2012).

*"There are times," he said with a serious expression, "when the world of politics touches us, so I—or we—must take a stand..."*

*As a writer, he continued, the choice to retreat into an ivory tower cannot last forever.*

*There comes a point when I have to come down (from the ivory tower). There is a moment when you cannot avoid politics anymore. So, (just) writing is no longer enough..."* he explained ("Tokoh: Seno Gumira Ajidarma," 2012).

Through his statement, it can be seen that Ajidarma realizes that even though he was capable and entitled to it the award given to him had an underlying purpose related to matters of a political nature and full of interests. Even, on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012, Ajidarma released a letter of apology and expressed his unwillingness to accept the award on his blog, *duniasukab.com*. Žižek states that the *ex nihilo* is temporal and cannot last as long as when it occurs in subjects, that is because they will eventually be trapped in another realm of the Symbolic.

"*Keroncong Pembunuhan*" is considered one of Ajidarma's radical acts, as he witnessed the reality that occurred during the New Order regime, which emphasized the ideology of militarism. Along with fifteen other short stories, "*Keroncong Pembunuhan*" is part of Ajidarma's trilogy entitled "*Penembak Misterius: Trilogi, Cerita Untuk Alina, Bayi Siapa Menangis di Semak-Semak?*" ("Mystery Shooter: A Trilogy, A Story of Alina, Whose Baby Cries from the Bushes?"). The trilogy is believed to be Ajidarma's response to the

mysterious shooting (*petrus*) incident that occurred in the 1980s in Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and the Central Java Province.

As stated earlier, Ajidarma will remain persistent in perpetuating his writings, as there is no alternative way for his work in the field of journalism to provide opportunities for him to continue working. This is contained in a collection of essays entitled *Ketika Jurnalisme Dibungkam, Sastra Harus Bicara*. Žižek always mentions that a subject who takes radical actions can achieve what is called an authentic subject, even though it is in the temporal moment.

## CONCLUSION

This study answers its research problem by demonstrating that the concept of *ex nihilo* in “*Keroncong Pembunuhan*” does not merely regard a character having doubts or rebelling for the sake of it. Instead, it is a major turning point where the marksman steps outside the rules and expectations (the Symbolic order) that usually define his life, like his contract, his boss, and the codes of his profession. His radical actions—questioning his assignment, demanding answers, threatening the mediator, and finally turning against the system that hired him—come from a deep, personal clash with the Real, something that cannot be explained away by ideology or the story’s logic. In Žižek’s terms, this is *ex nihilo*: a true break, where the character’s real self comes forward in response to the limits of the system.

What sets this research apart is how it brings Žižek’s psychoanalytic ideas into the conversation, especially *ex nihilo* and ideological fantasy, not just to track the character’s inner changes but also to highlight the author’s struggle for agency. Where past studies often focus on inner conflicts, morals, or political critiques, this study argues that Ajidarma’s writing itself is an act of resistance. He is not just reflecting the world as it is; he is using his stories to protest and challenge the powers that be, rewriting the rules through fiction.

This study can certainly helped readers understand the concept of *ex nihilo* in Seno Gumira Ajidarma’s *Keroncong Pembunuhan*. Even so, the authors realize that it still has some limitations. Because the analysis was fairly focused, it did not delve deeply into broader contexts, such as reader reactions or comparisons with other literary works. While Ajidarma’s life story provided us with important clues, comparing his work with that of other Indonesian authors or similar historical pieces could enrich the findings; thus, future research could tackle these gaps, for instance, by exploring the broader cultural impacts or performing comparative studies between texts. This would help readers better grasp concepts such as radical subjectivity and *ex nihilo* in Indonesian literary scholarship.

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