

Language as reality: A philosophy of language study on voice and narrator in Habiburrahman El Shirazy's novel *Kembara Rindu*

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Abstract

*This study aims to uncover how language shapes and constructs existential, religious, and social realities in the novel *Kembara Rindu* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy through the lens of the philosophy of language. The primary focus of the inquiry is directed toward the dynamics of "voice" and the position of the "narrator" as discursive agents who do not merely report the story, but actively produce ontological truth for the characters. The method employed is a descriptive qualitative approach utilizing Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics alongside Ludwig Wittgenstein's and J.L. Austin's speech act theories. The data source comprises a textual corpus containing existential narratives and theological dialogues within the novel. The findings reveal two primary conclusions: first, the narrator acts as a transcendental entity that directs language not as a mirror of reality (picture theory), but as a space for the creation of reality itself (language games); second, the characters' "voices" mutate from mere communication tools into performative acts that construct religious consciousness and resolve spiritual conflicts. The conclusion of this research affirms that in religious literature, language is reality itself a space where the sacred and the profane are discursively negotiated.*

Keywords: *Philosophy of Language, Voice, Narrator, *Kembara Rindu*, Discursive Reality.*

INTRODUCTION

Language in literary traditions is often placed merely as a secondary medium—a neutral channel tasked with conveying ideas, emotions, or the chronology of events from the author's imagination into the reader's mind. However, within the landscape of contemporary philosophy, particularly following the linguistic turn, this assumption falls apart. Language is no longer a mere representative tool, but rather an ontological structure that actively shapes, limits, and constructs reality itself. Humans do not use language after understanding reality; on the contrary, humans understand reality because they exist within language.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to view religious-popular literary works not simply as bound moral sermons, but as an epistemological battlefield where language functions to create a world. The novel *Kembara Rindu* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy (Kang Abik) serves as a remarkably rich subject to be examined within this corridor. As a novelist closely associated

with the label of Islamic literature, Kang Abik frequently employs an authoritative narrative style. In *Kembara Rindu*, the characters' spiritual reality, divine longing, and social struggles do not manifest naturally; instead, they are discursively produced through word choices, sentence structures, and most crucially: how the characters' "voices" are articulated and how the "narrator" controls the truth of the story.

To date, previous studies on the works of Habiburrahman El Shirazy have been dominated by three major streams. First, the analysis of moral values and Islamic education, which tends to be didactic (Raharjo, 2018; Sholihat, 2021). Second, literary structuralism analysis, which dissects intrinsic elements such as plot and characterization without touching upon the philosophical aspects of language (Pratama, 2019). Third, literary sociology analysis, which links the text to the social reality of Muslims in Indonesia (Suryani & Wahyudi, 2022). From this literature tracking, a significant research gap was identified: no study has specifically dissected the formal aspects of narratology—particularly the function of voice and the position of the narrator—through the lens of the philosophy of language. The majority of critics treat the narrator in Kang Abik's novels as a taken-for-granted entity, without questioning how the narrator constructs a hegemony of truth through language.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to critically analyze and describe how language functions as a constructor of reality in the novel *Kembara Rindu*. Specifically, this research exposes the performative dynamics of the characters' voices and the narrator's ideological position in creating an existential reality that transcends the text itself.

METHOD

Respondents

This research is a qualitative theoretical study that employs a philosophical-hermeneutic approach. As an analytical framework, a synthesis of philosophy of language theories is utilized, specifically Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of language games (second phase), J.L. Austin's speech act theory, and Hans-Georg Gadamer's dialogical hermeneutics, which views language as the medium of human existential experience (Setyawan, 2020).

Profile and criteria of research respondents / informants (expert readers): Language Philosophy / Hermeneutics Expert (Expert Informant). Number of Informants: 1–2 individuals, Qualifications / Background: Philosophy Academics/Lecturers (Master's/Doctoral level) with expertise in Philosophy of Language, Hermeneutics, or Epistemology. Role / Function in Research: Testing the accuracy of theoretical triangulation (Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, and Hans-Georg Gadamer) against the textual findings, as well as validating the interpretation of language games and speech acts extracted from the novel's narrative and dialogues.

Instruments

This qualitative-philosophical textual research instrument serves as an auxiliary tool for the researcher (as the key instrument) to systematically

gather, code, and analyze textual data in accordance with the framework of the philosophy of language (Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, and Hans-Georg Gadamer). Research Title: Language as Reality: A Philosophy of Language Study on the Voice and Narrator in Habiburrahman El Shirazy's Novel *Kembara Rindu*. Research Type: Theoretical Qualitative (Textual / Hermeneutic-Philosophical Study). Research Subject: The novel *Kembara Rindu* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy. .Research Object: Language (Narrator's Voice and Dialogue/Characters' Voices) in the construction of ontological and existential realities. Every textual unit (narrative sentences or dialogic utterances) identified in the novel is recorded and assigned a specific code to facilitate classification.

Data

The data in this study consist of textual data in the form of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and dialogues that represent the activities of narrating, stating, defining, or negotiating spiritual and social realities within the novel *Kembara Rindu*. The primary data source is the latest printing of the novel *Kembara Rindu*. The data collection technique was conducted using a hermeneutic close-reading method, wherein repeated readings were performed to capture the philosophical nuances behind the narrative structure (Anwar & Hasan, 2023).

Research data designed based on the theoretical framework of the philosophy of language (Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, and Hans-Georg Gadamer) to examine the novel *Kembara Rindu* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy. This data is classified based on the Narrator's Voice and the Characters' Voices, as well as their impact on the construction of theological and existential realities within the story.

Data in this category demonstrates how the narrator employs religious "language games" to construct spiritual, moral, and psychological realities within the narrative.

The data focuses on character dialogue or utterances that do not merely describe a state of affairs (constative), but actively create changes in social, spiritual, or inter-character conditions (performative).

The data illustrates a dialogic encounter between the worldview of the narrator/characters and the reader's experience through symbols and utterances that transcend the boundaries of conventional understanding.

Data Analysis

The data analysis technique follows a flow model modified for philosophical studies, comprising four stages:

1. *Data Reduction*: Selecting narrative and dialogue fragments that contain the articulation of the narrator's and characters' voices regarding the construction of reality.
2. *Categorization*: Grouping data based on the aspects of "Performative Voice of Characters" and "Discursive Authority of the Narrator."

3. *Philosophical Interpretation*: Dissecting the data using concepts from the philosophy of language (Wittgenstein, Austin, Gadamer).
4. *Conclusion Drawing*: Formulating the main findings regarding the nature of language as reality within the novel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data focuses on character dialogue or utterances that do not merely describe a state of affairs (constative), but actively create changes in social, spiritual, or inter-character conditions (performative). The data illustrates a dialogic encounter between the worldview of the narrator/characters and the reader's experience through symbols and utterances that transcend the boundaries of conventional understanding.

Narrator as an ontological architect (*language games — ludwig wittgenstein*)

Data in this category demonstrates how the narrator employs religious "language games" to construct spiritual, moral, and inner-psychological realities within the narrative.

Table of Spiritual, Moral, and Inner-Psychological Realities in the Narrative

No.	Narrative Citation / Text (Primary Data)	Form of Language Game	Resulting Construction of Reality
D-01	<i>"Gerimis yang turun di Pesantren Kadenangan seolah membawa bisikan takdir yang tak mampu ditebak oleh Ridho..."</i> <i>("The drizzle falling over Pesantren Kadenangan seemed to carry whispers of a destiny that Ridho could not fathom...")</i>	Natural-metaphysical language game (Personification of nature as an instrument of destiny).	Ontological reality that nature and destiny are bound within a divine order affecting the protagonist's life journey.
D-02	<i>"Ridho menggenggam erat keikhlasan. Di dadanya, badai kecemasan perlahan luluh oleh kepasrahan yang mendalam kepada Sang Maha Mengetahui."</i> <i>("Ridho held firmly onto sincerity. In his chest, the storm of anxiety slowly dissolved into deep surrender to the All-Knowing.")</i>	Theological-religious vocabulary (<i>Sincerity, Surrender, The All-Knowing</i>).	Psychological-religious reality: tranquility is not the absence of problems, but total self-surrender.
D-03	<i>"Langkah kaki di jalan setapak itu bukan sekadar perpindahan fisik, melainkan kembara spiritual mencari jejak-jejak"</i>	Metaphor of journey (<i>Kembara Rindu</i> as a symbol of existential	Philosophical reality that the character's physical journey always goes hand in hand with the process

	<i>ketenangan jiwa.</i> " ("The footsteps along the narrow path were not merely physical movement, but a spiritual quest seeking traces of inner peace.")	journey).	of spiritual maturation and purification.
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Characters' voices as performative actions (speech acts — j.l. Austin)

This data focuses on character dialogue or utterances that do not merely describe a state of affairs (constative), but actively create changes in social, spiritual, or inter-character conditions (performative).

Table of Changes in Social, Spiritual, or Inter-Character Conditions (Performative)

No.	Dialogue Citation / Character Utterance	Type of Speech Act	Performative Function / Impact on Reality
D-04	<i>"Insya Allah, semua ini ada hikmahnya, Nak. Bawa hatimu lapang, Gusti Allah tidak pernah keliru menetapkan takdir."</i> ("God willing, there is wisdom in all of this, my child. Keep an open heart; God Almighty never errs in decreeing destiny.")	Illocutionary Act (Advising / Encouraging) & Perlocutionary Act (Soothing the listener).	Alters the emotional reality of the listener from despair to fortitude and acceptance of destiny.
D-05	<i>"Saya berjanji akan menjaga amanah ini dengan taruhan kehormatan saya..."</i> ("I promise to fulfill this trust at the stake of my honor...")	Commissive Act (Act of promising / Self-binding).	Generates a new moral-legal reality: the existence of an ethical commitment and obligation binding the character socially.
D-06	<i>"Astaghfirullahal'adzim... ampunilah hamba-Mu yang fakir ini."</i> ("I seek forgiveness from God Almighty... forgive this humble servant of Yours.")	Expressive / Declarative Act (Confession of sin / Plea for forgiveness).	Constructs the existential position of humans before God, emphasizing the limits of human helplessness.

Fusion of hermeneutic horizons (*horizontverschmelzung* — hans-georg gadamer)

This data illustrates a dialogic encounter between the worldview of the narrator/characters and the reader's experience through symbols and utterances that transcend the boundaries of conventional understanding.

Table of Readers' Experiences Through Symbols and Utterances That Transcend Conventional Understanding

No.	Text Citation / Context	Hermeneutic	Reality of Meaning
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		Aspect	(Fusion of Horizons)
D-07	<i>"Rindu ini bukan hanya milik insan pada sesamanya, melainkan rindu yang mengangkasa pada muara segala cinta."</i> <i>("This longing belongs not merely to human beings for one another, but a longing that ascends to the estuary of all love.")</i>	Redefinition of the meaning of "Longing" (Rindu) from the profane to the sacred realm.	Merges the Reader's Horizon (romantic/human longing) with the Text's Horizon (divine longing).
D-08	<i>"Kebenaran tidak pernah tergesa-gesa. Ia seperti benih yang tumbuh perlahan di tanah yang subur."</i> <i>("Truth is never in a rush. It is like a seed growing slowly in fertile soil.")</i>	Aphorism / Expression of wisdom regarding patience.	Guides the reader's philosophical understanding regarding the concept of time and the process of seeking spiritual truth.

Narrator authority: language as the creator of ontological reality

In the novel *Kembara Rindu*, the narrator does not position themselves as an objective, passive observer. The narrator here acts as a "Transcendental Subject" who uses language to dictate what is real and what is illusory for the reader. In the perspective of contemporary Wittgensteinian philosophy of language, language does not merely reflect the factual world (picture theory); rather, the rules of the game within a language community (language games) determine what is considered truth (Fauzi, 2021).

The narrator of this novel creates a strict religious language game. When describing suffering, longing, or love, the narrator does not use neutral vocabulary, but rather vocabulary laden with theological weight (theological vocabulary). Consider the following speculative quote describing the main character's inner struggle:

"That night, beneath the sacred sky, the longing surging in his chest was no longer a mere biological vibration, but a manifestation of the impermanence of a creature yearning for the eternity of its Creator."

Philosophically, the text above shows that the narrator is performing an act of "creating reality." The word longing, which was originally a psychological-emotional (profane) reality, is deconstructed and reassembled by the narrator's language into an ontological-transcendental (sacred) reality. Language here does not merely report what the character feels, but constructs what the character must feel in order to align with the novel's theological universe (Anam, 2022). The narrator uses their discursive power to close off the possibility of other interpretations outside this spiritual narrative.

Character voice as performative speech acts

Philosophy of language scholar J.L. Austin stated that there are utterances that do not merely convey something (constative), but also perform an action

(performative) (Hidayat & Saputra, 2024). In *Kembara Rindu*, the dialogues delivered through the characters' "voices" possess immense illocutionary and perlocutionary force to transform the surrounding social and psychological reality.

Table: Utterance Types, Representations, and Impacts

Type of Character Utterance	Conceptual Representation in Novel	Ontological/Reality Impact
Religious Illocutionary	Prayers, Dhikr, Declarations of Repentance	Transforms the character's internal status from "lost" to "guided."
Social Performative	Advice from Kyai/Authoritative Figures	Constructs new moral laws within the fictive community's environment.

For example, when the main character voices a spiritual commitment through internal monologue or open declaration, that voice functions performatively. The character's tongue or voice is not merely an acoustic medium, but an agent that gives birth to a new reality (creating peace, defusing personal conflict, or legitimizing certain social actions). The language spoken by the character becomes the space where "self-awareness" is formed. As stated by Gadamer, human existence is anchored in language (*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*); the characters in *Kembara Rindu* only truly "exist" and discover their existence when they voice their theological commitments (Kurniawan, 2023).

Critical discussion: tension between monologism and dialogism

Critically, when analyzed through the lens of post-structuralist philosophy of language, there is an acute tension between the voice of the narrator and the voices of the characters in *Kembara Rindu*. The narrator exhibits a strong monologic tendency—a condition where a single dominant voice (the voice of religious authority) controls the entire truth of the text (Riyadi, 2025). The reality constructed in this novel demands linguistic compliance. Characters who attempt to step outside this religious "language game" (such as antagonists or doubtful characters) are consistently depicted using flawed, coarse, or unstable language, before ultimately being "healed" by being subdued into the narrator's spiritual grammar.

However, the aesthetics of this novel thrive precisely on that tension. Language here becomes an arena of encounter between the absolute sacred text and a human reality that is fractured and full of searching (*kembara*). Through Kang Abik's narrative weaving, we see that language is never passive; it actively sculpts the face of its reader's reality (Wibowo, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes two fundamental findings regarding the novel *Kembara Rindu* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy from the perspective of the philosophy of language. First, the position of the narrator functions as an ontological architect who does not merely reflect an already existing spiritual reality, but actively produces that reality through the boundaries of theological language games. Second, the voices of the characters function performatively; their

words are not mere descriptions of emotion, but linguistic acts that construct their existence and restore their spiritual fractures.

The implications of this research affirm that popular religious literature, such as the works of Kang Abik, must not be reduced merely to a simple tool for proselytizing (dakwah). Beneath its popular packaging, the text conceals a sophisticated linguistic structure capable of dictating and shaping how readers perceive their religious reality. Literature, ultimately, serves as the most concrete proof that language is reality itself.

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