

## A Formalist Analysis of Expression and Aesthetic Structure in Andrea Hirata's *Ayah*

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the formalist dimensions of expression in *Ayah*, a novel by Andrea Hirata. Employing a formalist approach to literary criticism, the analysis focuses on the internal structure of the text, stylistic language choices, and intrinsic literary elements, deliberately excluding external factors such as the author's biography and socio-historical context. Andrea Hirata is widely recognized for his distinctive narrative voice, rich diction, evocative symbolism, and innovative narrative techniques. This research specifically investigates how formal elements such as metaphor, plot structure, setting, point of view, and dialogue, contribute to the expressive power of the novel and reinforce its central themes. In addition, it explores how Hirata's linguistic constructions convey emotional depth and generate aesthetic pleasure for readers. The findings indicate that *Ayah* presents a complex narrative structure enriched by artistic language use. Formalist features, including symbolism, repetition, and irony, significantly deepen the narrative's meaning and emotional resonance. Therefore, the study affirms that the novel's aesthetic strength and emotional impact are primarily rooted in its formal elements, which effectively engage readers through refined literary techniques.

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## 1. Introduction

Efforts to understand literary works continue to evolve in contemporary literary studies, particularly with the increasing emphasis on text-centered criticism. Among the major approaches, formalism remains influential because it prioritizes the internal mechanisms and linguistic construction of literary texts. Internal mechanisms refer to the structural organization and stylistic devices employed by the author in shaping meaning. Analysis within this framework typically examines elements such as plot, characterization, setting, and narrative structure (Bartleby, 2024). Meanwhile, the study of literary language focuses on defamiliarization techniques that enable texts to produce distinctive aesthetic effects.

In contemporary literary scholarship, formalist criticism has re-emerged as an important methodological orientation for examining how literary texts generate meaning through their internal structures rather than through external contextual explanations. This renewed interest reflects a broader movement in literary studies that emphasizes textual autonomy and the analytical value of close reading. Within this framework, literary meaning is understood as emerging from the interaction of linguistic patterns, narrative organization, and stylistic devices that operate within the text itself.

Defamiliarization functions as a key formalist concept that renders familiar objects or experiences strange through creative linguistic manipulation (Purbo et al., 2022). In this regard, *Ayah* exhibits a distinctive narrative pattern characterized by retrospective movement, dialogic richness, and dense metaphorical language. These features indicate that the novel is not merely thematically engaging but also formally sophisticated. However, despite the novel's popularity and critical reception, its aesthetic construction has not been sufficiently examined through a rigorous formalist lens.

Previous studies on *Ayah* have largely concentrated on thematic interpretation, moral values, or general intrinsic description (Botifar & Zulyani, 2023; Khristiyanti, 2017). While these works acknowledge the presence of intrinsic elements, they tend to treat form as static components rather than as dynamic devices that actively generate meaning and emotional effect. Consequently, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the systematic examination of formal mechanisms such as narrative fragmentation, symbolic repetition, and patterned figurative language that collectively operate to produce the novel's aesthetic coherence and emotional intensity. This gap indicates the need for a more rigorous text-centered investigation.

Addressing this limitation, the present study advances a focused formalist reading that foregrounds the mechanics of expression in *Ayah*. Rather than merely identifying intrinsic elements, this research examines how Hirata's stylistic choices function interactively to construct emotional resonance and narrative immersion. By situating the analysis within contemporary formalist scholarship and employing systematic close textual analysis, the study seeks to demonstrate how literary expression in *Ayah* emerges from the orchestration of linguistic and structural devices embedded within the narrative.

Accordingly, this study aims to: (1) identify the dominant formal elements in *Ayah*, (2) analyze how these elements function aesthetically through defamiliarization and symbolic patterning, and (3) explain how formal structures contribute to the novel's emotional impact. These objectives are pursued through a qualitative descriptive design using close reading and content analysis (Aini et al., 2022). The data consist of selected textual quotations from the novel, which are systematically categorized and interpreted based on formalist principles (Aydm, 2022; Ramadhayanti et al., 2021).

By focusing on the interaction between linguistic expression and narrative structure, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how contemporary Indonesian fiction constructs aesthetic experience through formal devices. As one of the widely read works of contemporary Indonesian fiction, *Ayah* presents a compelling case for formalist inquiry. The novel portrays paternal struggle and emotional endurance, yet its artistic significance lies equally in its narrative craftsmanship and linguistic texture (Pasaribu et al., 2021). Examining these formal dimensions is essential for understanding how Andrea Hirata transforms everyday experiences into aesthetically powerful literary expression.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of formalist criticism within the context of Indonesian literature by demonstrating how intrinsic textual devices function dynamically rather than descriptively. It also illustrates the continuing relevance of formalist methodology for analyzing modern literary narratives characterized by stylistic experimentation and emotional complexity. Practically, the findings may provide a useful

analytical model for scholars and students conducting close textual analysis of modern Indonesian fiction.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Formalism

Formalism is a major school of literary theory that emphasizes the internal features of a literary text rather than external factors such as the author's biography or socio-historical background. According to Baldwin (2021), formalist criticism focuses on how a text is constructed, including its syntax, diction, grammatical patterns, and the interrelation of structural elements. The primary concern of formalism is the concept of literariness, namely the specific qualities that make a text literary.

Russian Formalism emerged as a reaction against traditional literary approaches that prioritized historical, psychological, and sociological interpretations (Manshur, 2019). This movement shifted literary studies toward synchronic textual analysis and rejected the assumption that literary works merely reflect social reality (Botifar & Zulyani, 2023). Instead, formalists view literary works as autonomous verbal artifacts whose meaning is generated through internal devices and structural organization.

A central contribution of Russian Formalism is the concept of literariness (*literaturnost*), which refers to the distinctive features that differentiate literary language from ordinary communication. Formalist scholars argue that literary texts foreground linguistic form through devices such as metaphor, repetition, narrative disruption, and symbolic patterning. These devices function not only as decorative elements but as structural mechanisms that shape the reader's aesthetic perception and interpretive engagement.

A formalist reading requires close attention to narrative technique, linguistic patterning, and artistic devices that shape readers' aesthetic experience (Purwarno & Efrizah, 2025). Through systematic close reading, critics can identify how specific formal elements interact to generate coherence, tension, and emotional resonance within the narrative structure. To complement this, phenomenological approaches explore how aesthetic qualities are perceived and interpreted by readers (Sunarto & Yulika, 2025). From this combined perspective, literary analysis emphasizes how meaning is produced through textual form rather than through external interpretation.

Recent scholarship also demonstrates that formalist approaches remain relevant for examining narrative technique and stylistic construction in modern literary texts. Contemporary literary analysis increasingly integrates formalist close reading with linguistic stylistics to investigate how textual structures guide interpretation and emotional response. For instance, close textual analysis can reveal deeper ideological and aesthetic structures embedded in narrative discourse (Efrizah & Purwarno, 2026). This reinforces the continuing applicability of formalist methodology in contemporary literary studies.

In the present study, formalism provides the primary analytical framework to examine how internal mechanisms particularly expression and aesthetic structure, operate in Andrea Hirata's novel *Ayah*.

## 2.2 Aesthetic in Literary Works

Aesthetic judgment is a central concern in understanding how individuals interpret and respond to metaphors and artistic elements in literary texts, showing that aesthetic evaluation involves philosophical consideration of beauty and expression in literature (Ziadi, 2025). Within literary studies, aesthetic value is often manifested through the author's manipulation of language, imagery, rhythm, and narrative structure. From a formalist perspective, aesthetic effect is not accidental but is carefully constructed through specific textual devices. Contemporary aesthetics literature highlights the autonomy of aesthetic properties in shaping artistic interpretation and experience (Martínez Marín, 2024).

Literary beauty emerges from the harmonious interaction between form and meaning, particularly through stylistic choices that foreground the artistic quality of language (Purwarno & Efrizah, 2025). Contemporary aesthetics further recognize that concepts like the beautiful and sublime influence how readers interpret texts (Hasanova & Davlatova, 2026). This view aligns with formalist principles that treat literary language as intentionally patterned and aesthetically motivated.

In the context of the novel *Ayah*, aesthetic structure can be observed through Andrea Hirata's use of metaphorical language, emotionally charged dialogue, and rhythmic narration. These features contribute to the novel's artistic impact and justify its analysis through a formalist lens.

## 2.3 Expression in Literary Texts

Expression in literary works refers to the linguistic and stylistic means through which characters' emotions, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships are conveyed. In narrative fiction, expression is frequently realized through dialogue, narrative voice, and figurative language. From a formalist standpoint, expressive elements are not merely communicative but also aesthetic devices that shape readers' emotional engagement.

Expressive language plays a crucial role in constructing meaning and cultural nuance within literary discourse (Efrizah, 2025). This view is further supported by Efrizah et al. (2025), who emphasize that intercultural dimensions embedded in literary language often emerge through nuanced expressive forms that mediate between local and broader traditions. Close textual attention to linguistic expression therefore remains essential for uncovering how aesthetic and emotional effects are produced.

In *Ayah*, the expressions used by characters especially in dialogic exchanges function as key stylistic markers. They not only reveal emotional depth but also contribute to the novel's aesthetic texture. Therefore, examining expression through a formalist framework enables a more precise understanding of how linguistic choices generate literary effects.

## 2.4 Language Style and Stylistics

Stylistics is closely related to formalism because both approaches emphasize the systematic analysis of linguistic features in literary texts. Stylistic analysis investigates diction, sentence structure, figurative language, and discourse patterns to uncover how aesthetic meaning is produced. As noted by Baldwin (2021), formalist criticism often overlaps with stylistics in its attention to textual mechanics. Variation in language use such as code-mixing, regional dialect insertion, and metaphorical density can function as deliberate artistic

strategies (Purwarno & Efrizah, 2025). Andrea Hirata's *Ayah* demonstrates distinctive stylistic features, including the incorporation of Bangka Belitung Malay, the use of foreign lexical items, emotionally expressive dialogue, and poetic narrative passages. Formalist analysis demonstrates how close reading of narrative techniques and stylistic devices reveals textual structures and meaning (Putra et al., 2024). These stylistic characteristics make the novel particularly suitable for formalist examination, especially in relation to expression and aesthetic structure.

## **2.5 Previous Studies**

Several previous studies have examined Andrea Hirata's *Ayah*, primarily focusing on structural and thematic aspects (Khristiyanti, 2017; Botifar & Zulyani, 2023). While these studies contribute valuable insights into the novel's intrinsic elements, they tend to emphasize general structural analysis rather than detailed linguistic and aesthetic mechanisms.

Recent work also demonstrates the effectiveness of close textual reading in uncovering deeper narrative dynamics (Efrizah & Purwarno, 2026). However, specific attention to expressive language and aesthetic structuring in *Ayah* remains limited.

Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by providing a more focused formalist analysis of expressive language in character dialogue, aesthetic patterning in narrative construction, and the interaction between linguistic form and emotional effect. By doing so, this research extends previous scholarship and offers a more fine-grained understanding of how Andrea Hirata's stylistic choices enhance narrative immersion in *Ayah*.

## **3. Method**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design to examine the formalist features of expression and aesthetic structure in Andrea Hirata's novel *Ayah*. Qualitative research is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting textual phenomena particularly words, phrases, and character utterances within their natural literary context. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), qualitative research aims to explore and understand the meanings individuals or texts assign to a social or human problem.

The descriptive orientation of this study enables a systematic and detailed analysis of how linguistic expression and aesthetic devices function within the narrative. The formalist approach is used as the primary analytical lens to foreground intrinsic textual elements rather than external biographical or sociological factors.

### **3.2 Data Source and Unit of Analysis**

The primary data source of this research is the novel *Ayah* by Andrea Hirata, published in 2015 by PT Bentang Pustaka. The study uses the official digital (PDF) version of the novel to ensure textual consistency.

The unit of analysis consists of:

- a. character utterances
- b. expressive phrases
- c. stylistically marked sentences that reflect formalist features, particularly those related to expression and aesthetic structure.

### 3.3 Sampling Technique

This study applies purposive sampling to select relevant textual data. Purposive sampling is used because the research intentionally focuses on utterances that demonstrate significant expressive and aesthetic characteristics consistent with formalist analysis.

The selection criteria include:

1. Utterances containing expressive emotional content
2. Passages showing distinctive stylistic patterning
3. Dialogue reflecting aesthetic language use
4. Sentences exhibiting foregrounded linguistic devices

Only data meeting these criteria are included in the analysis.

### 3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through systematic close reading and textual observation. In qualitative literary research, observation refers to careful and repeated examination of textual phenomena. The data collection procedures were conducted in the following stages:

1. Reading the novel intensively and repeatedly.
2. Identifying character utterances relevant to expression and aesthetic form.
3. Marking and extracting selected textual data.
4. Classifying the data based on formalist categories.
5. Organizing the data into an analytical corpus

These procedures ensure that the selected data directly support the research objectives.

### 3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

The study employs qualitative content analysis within a formalist framework. Content analysis is used to interpret how intrinsic textual elements produce aesthetic and expressive effects.

To enhance analytical rigor, the analysis integrates systematic close reading with formalist coding procedures. Close reading allows the researcher to examine linguistic nuances, figurative constructions, and narrative patterns at a micro-textual level, while content analysis enables the systematic categorization of recurring stylistic features across the corpus of selected passages.

The analysis follows three main stages adapted from qualitative analysis procedures:

1. Data reduction  
Selected utterances are filtered and focused based on formalist relevance.
2. Data display  
The categorized data are organized into analytical tables based on:
  - a. Type of expression
  - b. Stylistic device
  - c. Aesthetic function

### 3. Conclusion drawing and interpretation

The researchers interpret how linguistic expression and aesthetic structure interact to produce literary effects in *Ayah*.

To ensure analytical consistency, each textual excerpt was examined repeatedly to verify the presence of formalist features such as metaphorical foregrounding, symbolic recurrence, and stylistic deviation. This iterative process strengthens the reliability of interpretation and minimizes subjective bias in textual analysis.

Throughout the analysis, emphasis is placed on intrinsic textual features in accordance with formalist principles. To ensure analytical rigor, the study employs systematic close reading and consistent formalist coding procedures.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Results

#### 4.1.1 Expressive Language in Character Utterances

Close reading of *Ayah* reveals that expressive meaning in the novel is primarily constructed through carefully patterned character utterances. The data show that emotional intensity is not conveyed through explicit authorial explanation but through foregrounded dialogue and metaphorical phrasing. This finding aligns with the first research objective, namely identifying dominant formal elements in the text.

One prominent example appears in Sabari's reflective utterance describing his emotional confusion: "*Tak ada yang dapat dipahaminya, telapak tangannya adalah anak anak sungai yang tak tentu mana hulu mana hilirnya.*" The metaphor of branching rivers functions as a formal device that transforms an internal psychological state into a perceptible visual image. From a formalist perspective, the utterance performs defamiliarization by rendering an abstract emotional condition into concrete linguistic form.

The analysis also indicates that expressive density in *Ayah* is frequently achieved through economical diction. Short but symbolically loaded utterances recur throughout the narrative, producing cumulative emotional weight. Rather than relying on lengthy exposition, Hirata compresses affect into stylistically marked sentences, demonstrating the foregrounding of language that formalist critics identify as a key marker of literariness.

Furthermore, dialogic exchanges between characters consistently exhibit rhythmic and figurative patterning. Emotional meaning emerges through repetition, metaphor, and tonal shifts within speech. This confirms that expression in *Ayah* operates primarily as an intrinsic textual mechanism rather than as a purely thematic feature. In addition to these patterned features, subtle situational irony also emerges in several narrative moments, particularly when Sabari's hopeful expressions are later undermined by subsequent events, thereby intensifying the text's emotional tension.

Importantly, several passages demonstrate how expressive language is tightly integrated with narrative movement. For instance, Sabari's sense of emotional disorientation is reinforced by imagery of instability, where he is described as "*terombang ambing di riaknya, timbul, tenggelam.*" This rhythmic verbal pattern not only depicts psychological turbulence but also contributes to the novel's broader aesthetic orchestration. The identified expressive patterns are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Expressive Language and Formalist Functions*

No	Textual Excerpt	Type of Expression	Stylistic Device	Aesthetic Function
1.	“Tak ada yang dapat dipahaminya, telapak tangannya adalah anak anak sungai yang tak tentu mana hulu mana hilirnya.”	Emotional reflection	Extended metaphor	Defamiliarizes psychological confusion and visualizes inner turmoil
2.	Recurring references to Sabari's old bicycle	Symbolic narration	Motif repetition	Reinforces endurance and paternal sacrifice
3.	Intimate colloquial address forms in dialogue such as “Boi”	Intimate dialogue	Colloquial address	Creates emotional proximity and character authenticity
4.	Descriptive rain and rural atmosphere passages	Sensory expression	Visual imagery	Materializes abstract emotional atmosphere
5.	Alternation between Malay colloquial speech and lyrical narration	Stylistic layering	Register shift	Produces aesthetic tension and narrative depth

Source: Data processed from Hirata (2015)

#### 4.1.2 Aesthetic Structuring through Motif and Stylistic Patterning

Beyond individual utterances, the findings show that *Ayah* constructs aesthetic coherence through recurring symbolic motifs and patterned imagery. Objects such as the bicycle, notebook, and simple domestic items appear repeatedly across the narrative and function as structural anchors.

The bicycle motif, for example, is repeatedly associated with Sabari's perseverance and marginal social position. In one episode, the humble bicycle is contrasted with more competitive racing contexts, foregrounding the protagonist's endurance through material detail. Within a formalist framework, this patterned recurrence transforms the bicycle from a narrative prop into a unifying symbolic device that binds dispersed emotional moments across the text.

The data also demonstrate a consistent oscillation between colloquial Malay expressions and more lyrical narrative passages. Informal address forms such as “*Boi*” create intimacy, while adjacent poetic constructions elevate the emotional register. The aesthetic effect emerges from the tension between these two linguistic modes, producing a layered narrative voice.

In addition, sensory imagery functions as an affective bridge between textual form and reader response. A particularly striking example occurs during the scene of emotional loss when heavy rain accompanies Sabari's movement: “*Hujan pun turun dengan lebat. Sabari tak berteduh. Dia terus menuntun sepedanya sambil menangis tersedu sedu.*” The physical environment here operates as an extension of interior emotion, illustrating the formalist principle that imagery concretizes abstract feeling.

Collectively, these patterned stylistic features confirm that the aesthetic power of *Ayah* is systematically constructed through intrinsic formal devices.

## 4.2 Discussion

### 4.2.1 Expression as a Formal Engine of Emotional Meaning

The findings demonstrate that expression in *Ayah* is inseparable from its formal construction. Consistent with formalist principles, emotional depth in the novel is generated through patterned language rather than through external contextual explanation.

This indicates that emotional meaning in the novel is structurally embedded within the linguistic organization of the text. Rather than functioning as isolated emotional statements, expressive utterances form interconnected stylistic patterns that gradually intensify the narrative's affective impact.

The prominence of metaphorical utterances supports the formalist concept of defamiliarization. By transforming psychological states into striking linguistic images, Hirata compels readers to actively reconstruct meaning. This observation reinforces Bartleby (2024), who argues that formalist analysis foregrounds how internal textual organization produces aesthetic effect.

Such linguistic transformation illustrates how literary language disrupts ordinary perception, compelling readers to reconsider familiar emotional experiences through newly configured symbolic representations.

Moreover, the reliance on compressed expressive phrases indicates a high degree of textual economy. As noted by Purwarno and Efrizah (2025), literariness often emerges from the strategic foregrounding of linguistic form. The present findings extend this view by showing how such foregrounding operates specifically within character dialogue in contemporary Indonesian fiction. Importantly, emotional resonance in *Ayah* is cumulative and systematically patterned. Repetition of expressive utterances creates rhythmic intensification, allowing affect to build progressively across the narrative. This demonstrates that expression functions not as isolated moments but as part of a broader aesthetic system.

### 4.2.2 Interaction between Aesthetic Structure and Reader Engagement

The analysis further reveals that *Ayah* achieves its aesthetic impact through the interaction between micro level expression and macro level structural patterning. Recurring motifs such as the rusted bicycle operate as formal connectors that stabilize the otherwise emotionally fluctuating narrative.

This finding supports Efrizah and Purwarno (2026), who emphasize that close textual analysis can uncover deeper aesthetic structures embedded in narrative discourse. In *Ayah*, symbolic repetition, stylistic layering, and sensory imagery collectively guide reader attention toward emotionally charged nodes within the text.

The alternation between colloquial and poetic registers also produces a heteroglossic texture that enriches characterization. As observed by Efrizah (2025), Malay narrative discourse often generates meaning through the interaction of multiple linguistic codes. The present study confirms this pattern within Hirata's stylistic practice while maintaining a strictly formalist analytical focus.

However, the findings also reveal a productive boundary of formalist reading. While intrinsic analysis effectively explains the novel's aesthetic mechanics, certain features, particularly Bangka Belitung dialect insertion, hint at broader cultural dimensions that remain outside the scope of this study.

### 4.2.3 Implications for Formalist Study of Indonesian Novels

The study contributes theoretically by demonstrating that formalist criticism remains highly productive for examining contemporary Indonesian fiction. The analysis shows that *Ayah* achieves its expressive and emotional force primarily through internally patterned language, symbolic repetition, and stylistic orchestration.

Practically, the findings offer a replicable analytical model for close reading of character utterances in Indonesian novels. By combining purposive sampling of expressive passages with systematic formalist coding, the study provides a methodological template for future research. Nevertheless, future studies may benefit from integrating formalist analysis with complementary approaches such as stylistics or postcolonial criticism to explore how aesthetic structure interacts with broader cultural meanings.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has examined how expression and aesthetic structure operate in Andrea Hirata's *Ayah* through a formalist perspective. By foregrounding intrinsic textual features, the analysis demonstrates that the novel's emotional intensity and artistic power are primarily generated through its internal linguistic and structural mechanisms.

The findings reveal that several dominant formal strategies shape the novel's aesthetic effect. The retrospective and non-linear narrative movement functions as a structural device that mirrors the protagonist's emotional instability while sustaining reader engagement. Recurring symbolic motifs, particularly ordinary material objects, operate as cohesive formal units that unify the narrative and deepen thematic resonance. Moreover, Hirata's stylistic layering especially the interplay between colloquial Bangka Belitung Malay and lyrical narration produces a distinctive expressive texture that intensifies characterization and emotional immersion. The persistent use of sensory imagery further confirms the formalist premise that literary meaning emerges from patterned language.

These results reaffirm the central formalist claim that literariness resides in the organization of textual devices. In *Ayah*, expression functions not merely as communication but as an aesthetic engine that generates cumulative emotional force. This study therefore extends previous research by demonstrating that intrinsic elements in the novel operate dynamically and interactively rather than as static structural components.

Theoretically, this research supports the continued relevance of formalist criticism for the analysis of contemporary Indonesian fiction, particularly in uncovering how narrative technique and linguistic patterning produce aesthetic effects. Practically, the study offers a replicable close-reading model for examining expressive language in modern prose. Nevertheless, because this research deliberately brackets socio-historical context, certain regional linguistic features in the novel remain only partially explained. Future studies are therefore encouraged to integrate formalist analysis with complementary perspectives such as stylistics or postcolonial approaches to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of Hirata's narrative artistry. Overall, the study confirms that the expressive strength and aesthetic sophistication of *Ayah* are fundamentally rooted in its carefully orchestrated formal structures.

By demonstrating how linguistic expression, symbolic motifs, and narrative patterning interact systematically within the text, the research reinforces the analytical value of formalist criticism for understanding the aesthetic dynamics of contemporary Indonesian literature.

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