



The “I” and selfhood in a collection of poetry on personal things: Symbolic Barthesian Studies

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 April 2025

Revised 25 May 2025

Accepted 17 June 2025

Keywords:

“Hal yang Pribadi”

Selfhood

Poetic

children’s poetry

symbolic semiotics

ABSTRACT

This study explores how children's ego and selfhood are portrayed in the poetry collection Hal yang Pribadi by M. Fatan DZ. The book was selected because its poems present children's voices in a unique and reflective manner. The research employs Roland Barthes' theory of symbolic semiotics, particularly the concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth, to examine how meaning is constructed through words, imagery, and symbols in the poems. The analysis reveals that the narrative voice of “I” in the anthology is not neutral. Children's identities in the poems are often shaped by social values such as family norms, gender roles, and adult expectations. The “I” in the poetry emerges as a figure in the process of self-formation yet is also guided by the symbolic systems embedded in language. This study concludes that children's poetry does more than convey beauty and moral messages—it serves as a symbolic space in which children's identities are negotiated and represented in relation to the surrounding world.

1. Introduction

Children's literature is not only present as a means of entertainment and education, but also as a symbolic space that reflects the experiences, values, and ideological structures that shape the world of children. Children's poetry becomes a dense and imaginative form of expression, which contains the voice of the child, both as a narrative subject and as a cultural construction. One of the main issues in this study is how the child's identity is formed through language and symbols in the text. Representation of selfhood does not always come from the child's authentic experience but can be the result of negotiations between the child's imagination and the social discourse that surrounds it. And literature is a humanitarian science. It contains humanitarian values and humanizes humans. Literature in the classical perspective is seen as a science that is a “pseudo-scientific” area. This means that literature is a semi-scientific study because its scientific value is not absolutely one hundred percent accountable. Although as a study it falls into the “pseudo-scientific” category, the scientific elements in literature can still be accounted for. Therefore, in literary studies research cannot be separated from the realm of science, namely ontological, epistemological, and axiological (Ahmadi, 2019)

Children's literature is a form of imaginative expression that uses language as a medium to reconstruct a fictional world, convey inner experiences, and offer unique aesthetic values. Whether written by children themselves or by adults for a child audience, the essence of children's literature still lies in its ability to describe children's perspectives and reflect their reality, so that the debate about the author's origin becomes less relevant. Literature (in children's literature) is a form of imaginative creation with a certain language exposure that describes a fictional world, presents certain understandings and experiences, and contains certain aesthetic values that can be created by adults or children. Whether children's literature is literature written by adults aimed at children or literature written by children for their own circles is not questionable (Kartikasari, 2018). According to Rosid (2021) literature is born from a process of anxiety over the condition of society, in which children are part of the “small” society.



The collection of poems *Hal yang Pribadi* by M. Fatan DZ is interesting because it was written directly by a child. In his foreword, Fatan stated, "I titled this poetry book *Hal yang Pribadi* because it talks about my personal life. I initially wrote poetry as an experiment but finally I was able to create my own poetry book." This confession shows the existence of an "I" who is aware of himself, while also reflecting the relationship between personal expression and the conventions of poetic language. Values in children's literature include Personal values: emerge if stories in children's literature help children develop emotionally (for example learning to express feelings), intellectually (training how to think), imaginatively (stimulating imagination), socially (recognizing relationships with others), ethically (understanding what is good and bad), and religiously (growing spiritual awareness or religious values). Educational values: are seen if children's literature encourages children to explore and discover new things, develop language skills, get to know different cultures (multicultural), get used to reading, and learn to appreciate beauty (aesthetic values).

Barthes distinguishes the meaning of signs into three layers: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural/emotional meaning), and myth (ideological meaning constructed as if natural). With this concept, this study explores how Fatan's poems form a narrative about "I" as a subject who is in an ideological space, while also trying to give meaning to his own world. Because literature always talks about life, literature also provides a better understanding of that life. This understanding comes from the exploration of various forms of life, the secrets of life, the discovery and disclosure of various characters (Nurgiyantoro, 2016).

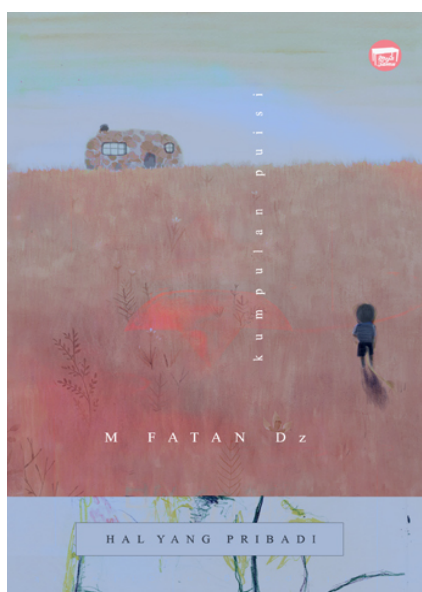


Figure1. Cover of The Book *Hal yang Pribadi*

2. Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach, by analyzing poetry in the book *Hal yang Pribadi* by M. Fatan DZ. The aim is to understand how the figure of "I" and the child's identity (selfhood) are displayed in poetry, both from the choice of words, the images used, and the values contained therein. The analysis was carried out using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which divides meaning into three levels:

Denotation → basic meaning,

Connotation → additional meaning influenced by culture,

Myth → hidden meaning that shows ideology (e.g. certain social values or norms)

The architecture of this study sees poetry as a way for children to recognize and express themselves. Therefore, the researcher pays attention to the position of "I" in poetry, although not solely taking the diction "I" which is free to speak, limited, or directed by adults, but also represents the "existence" of the self and the behavior of this "little" writer in life and assessing the color and hue in all aspects of his journey to find, find, and respond to "meaning". The method to

answer the problem is to look for words, symbols, and ways of conveying poetry that can show how children's identities are formed in the text. Meanwhile, the implementation steps: the researcher selects poems that highlight the word "I" and personal experiences, then reads them using a denotation-connotation-myth table to see their meaning in stages.

3. Result

The poem “Suatu Garis” describes a deep meaning through simple expressions. Denotatively, this poem talks about a basic form called “line” that can form something. However, if read more deeply, “line” carries a connotative meaning as a symbol of order, boundaries, direction of life, or even the foundation of a person’s existence. The child poet conveys that “we are made of shaped lines,” which symbolically can be interpreted as an acknowledgement that the human self is formed by small elements that build its identity.

The mythological meaning of this poem in the Barthesian framework implies that we, including children, are not completely free to form ourselves, because identity is built from social and symbolic structures of rules, norms, or values that are often not realized. Although it does not mention the word “I,” the use of the word “we” indicates a collective search for identity that shows the author’s social awareness. The short, straightforward, and non-decorative diction shows that the child’s voice in this poem is reflective and sharp in capturing the abstract concept of existence. This reinforces that the representation of selfhood in children’s poetry does not have to be explicit to be meaningful; it grows from the way children name the world and themselves in the language they know.

Suatu Garis
garis akan bisa dijadikan sesuatu
jangan remehkan garis
karena kita terbuat dari garis-garis
yang berbentuk

Table 1. Semiotic Analysis & Representation of Selfhood – Poem “Suatu Garis”

Aspect	Analysis
Denotation	Lines are basic shapes or visual patterns that form something
Connotation	Lines represent boundaries, directions, frameworks of life, or principles
Myth (ideology)	The subject (child) is formed by social “lines”: norms, rules and systems that appear simple, but have a strong influence
Representation of Selfhood	Although the word “I” does not appear, the use of “we” indicates a search for a shared identity and a sense of origin. The simple diction instead displays the child’s reflective and philosophical voice. Behind the short form of the poem, there is a view that the child’s self is shaped by social and symbolic structures that are larger than themselves.

The poem “Hal yang Pribadi” explicitly discusses the boundaries between the self and the outside world through the concept of “private” as something that is worth guarding and not being shared. Denotatively, the word “hal yang pribadi” refers to something that is intimate or secret. At the connotative level, this phrase represents the inner space, experiences, or thoughts that belong to the individual and are not for public consumption. The myth constructed in this poem is that a child’s identity needs to be controlled and limited by social norms, such as the obligation to keep feelings or thoughts secret from outsiders, except to family.

In terms of selfhood representation, this poem does not present “I,” but uses imperative structures such as “don’t tell anyone that.” This style shows a voice influenced by prohibitions or normative messages from the adult world. The child’s identity is presented as something that must be guarded and regulated, not expressed freely. This shows a form of social control over the child’s self-expression, while reinforcing the idea that poetry is a subtle vessel for internalizing norms.

Hal yang Pribadi
hal yang pribadi adalah sesuatu
yang tidak boleh diketahui orang lain
jika kita punya hal pribadi
jangan katakan pada siapapun itu
kecuali saudara atau keluarga kita

**Table 2.** Semiotic Analysis & Representation of Selfhood – Poem “Hal yang Pribadi”

Aspect	Analysis
Denotation	“Hal yang Pribadi” means something that is confidential or private. The sentence indicates that personal information should not be shared with others
Connotation	Contains meanings about personal space, a sense of security, and boundaries between self and others. There is a value of caution and control over self-disclosure.
Myth (ideology)	Society forms the idea that children should not share their feelings or thoughts freely. Personal information is considered only appropriate for family to know.
Representation of Selfhood	The “I” is not directly present, but the prohibitions in the poem show that the child’s identity is framed by socially instilled norms and boundaries. The child’s self is trained to hide or compartmentalize its expression, not as a free subject, but as a monitored and restricted individual.

The poem “Pagiku Hilang” by M. Fatan DZ presents the daily experiences of children in a reflective yet simple way. Denotatively, this poem describes the concrete consequences of not taking a nap, “pagiku Hilang”, “sore rusak” with a very casual and familiar time diction in a child’s life. However, connotatively, this poem records more than just a routine; “pagiku Hilang” gives the impression of a loss of enthusiasm and emotional disorder. Within the framework of the Barthesian myth, this poem conveys an ideological message about the importance of compliance with daily rules: taking a nap is not just a habit, but a child’s moral obligation so that their life is “ordered.” Children are taught, even though poetry, that discipline is a prerequisite for happiness.

The subject “I” in this poem appears as a person who is aware of and regrets the consequences of his actions, showing that the child is not only a passive actor, but also reflective of his choices. However, behind this awareness, it also appears that the narrative is formed in an environment of socially embedded values. Thus, the representation of selfhood in this poem is formed in the relationship between the child’s experiences and internalized norms. The child presents himself as an “I” who learns from chaos, but also as a subject who from the beginning has been given a moral framework of right and wrong by the adult world. This poem is a small mirror of the large process of self-formation.

Pagiku Hilang

pagiku hilang
soreku rusak dan kacau
karena aku tidak tidur siang sama sekali
seharusnya aku tidur siang
ini yang terjadi
jika aku tidak tidur siang
sedikit pun

Table 3. Semiotic Analysis & Representation of Selfhood – Poem “Pagiku Hilang”

Aspect	Analysis
Denotation	A child does not take a nap, so his afternoon feels ruined and chaotic. “Morning” and “afternoon” are used to express time literally.
Connotation	“My morning is gone” gives the impression of a loss of enthusiasm or cheerfulness. While “no nap” symbolizes a small action that has big consequences. There is a moral value inserted: children are considered to need to obey the ideal routine (such as napping) so that their days run smoothly. Disobedience results in chaos.
Myth (ideology)	“My morning is gone” gives the impression of a loss of enthusiasm or cheerfulness. While “no nap” symbolizes a small action that has big consequences. There is a moral value inserted: children are considered to need to obey the ideal routine (such as napping) so that their days run smoothly. Disobedience results in chaos.
Representation of Selfhood	I in this poem is present as a reflective being, aware of the cause and effect of his choices. However, this narrative also shows the internalization of normative values (sleep = good, not sleep = broken). The child’s identity is formed in the relationship between personal experience and repeated adult rules.



Interpretation of Findings

Analysis of three poems in Hal yang Pribadi shows that children's poetry is not just a space for aesthetic expression, but also a symbolic vehicle where children's identities are negotiated. The poem "Suatu Garis" presents existential meaning through simple metaphors, suggesting that children are aware of the formation of their identities through structural elements such as norms or values. "Hal yang Pribadi" displays restrictions on self-expression, indicating that children learn to filter expressions through family and social norms. Meanwhile, "Pagiku Hilang" describes personal reflections on daily rules that involve the relationship between concrete experiences and the internalization of disciplinary values. In general, these results show that children as subjects in poetry appear in two positions: as reflective individuals and as entities formed by social values. Thus, the poetic self that emerges is not a neutral or completely free voice, but rather a representation of a subject that is being formed, limited, and at the same time constructing meaning for itself.

Integration in Scientific Structure

This finding is in line with and enriches Barthes' semiotic theoretical framework, especially regarding the reading of myths as a system of ideological meaning. Children's poetry, which is often understood as light text or mere entertainment, turns out to contain a complexity of symbolic meaning that can be read as a representation of symbolic power and social control over the child. Therefore, this study expands the reading space of semiotics in children's literature, which has so far rarely been touched upon critically in the context of ideology and symbolism. Furthermore, the representation of selfhood in children's poetry shows an awareness of intersubjective self-construction. The poem "Pagiku Hilang" shows ethical and psychological dimensions in which children experience conflict between desire and rules. This brings together a semiotic approach with insights into children's cognitive and moral development, opening the door to interdisciplinary enrichment between literature, developmental psychology, and education.

Novelty and Contribution

This research offers novelty in two main aspects: First, the object of study is children's poetry written by children themselves, not works by adults for children, thus opening discourse about the authenticity of children's voices in literature. Second, the systematic application of Barthes' semiotic theory to children's poetry is a methodological contribution that strengthens the idea that children's works can also be read as complex ideological texts. Amidst the dominance of children's literature studies that still focus solely on moral or educational values, this symbolic approach places children's poetry in a more critical and reflective landscape.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study confirms that children have quite high symbolic and reflective capacities, even in simple language structures. Therefore, a more critical approach is needed in reading children's works as representations of power relations, not just spontaneous expressions. Practically, these results have implications in the world of education, especially in learning literary literacy: Guru dapat memanfaatkan puisi anak sebagai medium untuk memahami dinamika psikososial siswa. Educators can train children to express personal experiences with symbolic awareness, strengthening identity and empathy.

Children's literature writers and publishers are expected to be more open to children's works as a form of authentic expression, rather than merely constructed from an adult perspective.

Roland Barthes' Semiotics: Denotation, Connotation, and Myth

This study uses Roland Barthes' symbolic semiotic approach to analyze the representation of ego and selfhood in children's poetry. Barthes (1994) divides the sign system into three levels of meaning: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural or emotional meaning), and myth (ideological meaning that is considered natural). In his view, signs are never neutral; they always carry the burden of culture and ideology that shape the way we understand the world. Therefore, children's poetry can be read as texts that not only convey explicit messages but also contain symbolic meanings that shape the identity and position of the child's subject in society. Every child is unique (Aimang, 2025: 6) in interpreting the subtleties of their lives. Roland Barthes is known as one of the structuralist thinkers who diligently practices the Saussurean linguistic and semiological models. He is also a famous French intellectual and literary critic, an exponent of the application of structuralism and semiotics to literary studies. He argues that language is a system of signs that reflects the assumptions of a particular society at a particular time. For this reason, Barthes continued Saussure's



thinking by emphasizing the interaction between text and the personal and cultural experiences of its users (Maghfiroh, 2017: 48)

This concept becomes important when associated with Fatan's position as a children's writer. In his foreword, Fatan states that "I titled this poetry book *Hal yang Pribadi* because it talks about my personal life" (Fatan, 2019: v-vi). This statement shows that the poems in the anthology are not only aesthetic expressions, but also articulations of self-identity. However, because the language and symbols used remain within a broader social system, the "I" presented in the poems remains within an ideological framework that can be analyzed semiotically.

Myths are not lies, but rather a second system of meaning that disguises ideology as something "natural": The evolution of Barthes's thought in the 1960s and 1970s is marked by a radical reflection on the aims and limits of semiology, which, I believe, resulted in an inevitable broadening of his conception of ideology (Andrew, 1994: 72 in *Mythologies*). This allows the reading of children's poetry as a space where social values such as obedience, gender, and nationalism are inserted through simple symbols. Myths are a way for culture to disguise ideology as natural truth. Thus, children's poetry can become a counter-myth space when children express discomfort with social norms that are considered normal.

Barthes' semiotics views every cultural text, including children's poetry, as a sign system that stores layered meanings. Barthes distinguishes three levels of meaning: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural or emotional meaning), and myth (ideological meaning that is considered "natural"). Denotation appears in the form of concrete and narrative diction that is easy for children to understand. Connotation is present through emotional associations, for example, the word "home" can mean safe or depressed depending on the context. Myth appears when poetry reproduces or rejects dominant values, such as obedience, politeness, or the role of children in the family.

Children's Literature as a Representation of the World of Children

Children's literature is a work that depicts the world of children from a child's perspective, whether written by children or adults. Children's literature places the child's perspective as the center of the story and at the same time offers significant truths through impressive language". This is in line with Roland Barthes' thinking in his semiotic theory, that meaning is not fixed, but is shaped by social and cultural relations. Within Barthes' framework, children's literary texts can be analyzed through three layers of meaning: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural or emotional meaning), and myth (ideology hidden behind representation). Thus, children's literature not only conveys stories, but also reproduces certain social values and ideologies that shape children's perspectives on the world. The nature of children's poetry as part of children's literature is not much different from the nature of poetry in general, namely a literary genre that contains the author's feelings in the form of lines and stanzas with short language, dense in meaning with beautiful sounds and symbolic words (Didipu, 2013a in Didipu, 2020).

As another example, research by Nur Aini and Khaerunnisa (2024) in *Stylistics* shows how Barthes' theory can be used to reveal connotative and mythological meanings in visual media, which is also relevant to be applied in the analysis of children's literary texts. They emphasize that every representation in the text carries a cultural marker that can shape the reader's perception of reality. Children's stories not only reflect reality but also shape children's perspectives on self-identity and gender roles. This means that through the characters, plots, and narratives in the story, children learn what is considered "normal" or "ideal" in society, including how to be a man or a woman. Huck (1987) in (Nisya, 2024) emphasizes that children's books are books that have the child's eye at the center. Which means that children's books, children's literature, are books that place the child's point of view as the center of the story. In addition, Winch (1991) (Nisya, 2024) said that a good children's book is a book that delivers and departs from the child's perspective. It can be concluded that children's literature helps children to obtain stories about various information about life experiences. (Nisya, 2024).

Functions of Children's Literature: Aesthetic, Emotional, and Ideological

Children's literature not only provides entertainment but also forms self-awareness and social awareness. Children's literature helps the moral, affective, social, and cognitive development of children in an integrative manner". In Barthes' framework, this function works at the connotative and mythological levels, the text forms the perception of "good children", "obedient children", or vice versa. Barthes (1994) emphasized that the meaning of a text is not inherent in the author but is produced by the reader in a certain social and cultural context. Thus, children's literature acts as a field of representation of normative values that are refined in the narrative and image of child characters. Reading children's literature no longer stops at the surface educational value in Barthes' approach but reveals how these meanings are



constructed and inherited symbolically through cultural connotations and myths. This expands the potential for analyzing children's literature as an ideological practice as well as a reflection of children's identity in society.

As one of the varieties of literary works, children's literature has a main function according to the general function of literature as stated by Horatius, namely *dulce et utile* (in English, sweet and useful). *Dulce* (sweet) means very pleasant or enjoyable, while *utile* (useful) means that the content is educational (Mikics, 2007) in (Didipu, 2020). These two functions are in line with Bressler's view (1999) in (Didipu, 2020) who calls the two functions to teach and to entertain. The entertaining function (*dulce*) means that literature provides its own pleasure in the reader so that the reader feels interested in reading literature. The teaching function (*utile*) means that literature provides advice and instills ethics so that readers can emulate positive things in literary works.

Children's literature has a very important role in shaping children's character. Children's literature often presents moral values, ethics, and life principles that can be a guide for children in developing their character (Smith, J., & Jones, M., 2018. The Role of Children's Literature in Character Development, *Journal of Child Development and Education*, 2(1), 45–56) in (Mahpudoh, et al., 2024) Children's story books often raise themes about friendship, honesty, courage, and cooperation, which can help children understand these values and internalize them in their daily behavior.

Literature can also function as a means of entertainment and at the same time a medium to educate a child. Literature can fulfill a child's personal needs or satisfaction and develop language skills. A child's personal satisfaction after reading a literary work is important. In addition to influencing reading skills, literary works also function to develop children's insights. The function of literary works as a developer of language skills can be called educational value (Syah, 2020). Not only that, but children's literature also plays an important role in shaping children's attitudes, empathy, and social sensitivity towards their environment. Through the characters, plots, and moral values contained in stories, poems, or fairy tales, children learn to recognize differences, understand conflicts emotionally, and build a perspective on what is good and bad reflectively. In other words, the experience of reading literature involves more than just technical reading skills; it is a process of character formation through internalizing human values.

Language and Structure in Children's Poetry

Children's poetry is a type of poetry whose content is related to the world of children, either based on real experiences or the results of imagination. The language in children's poetry usually uses carefully chosen words, including figures of speech and images that can represent imagination, memories, and feelings. However, compared to adult poetry, children's poetry tends to use simpler words that are easier for children to understand. The language style is diaphanous, meaning clear and direct, not complicated or too symbolic like adult poetry which is prismatic. In relation to children's literature in the form of poetry, poetry that can be read by children is poetry that contains content about children, both in terms of their factual experiences and their imaginative experiences. Children's poetry is written with selective words, metaphors, and imagery to describe imagination, memory, and emotions. However, children's poetry uses more words that are easy for children to understand. (Mitchell in Tarigan, 1986) in Rozak, 2018).

The nature of children's literature is purely imaginative, not based on facts, not documentary or factual. This element of imagination is very prominent in children's literature. The nature of children's literature that is unique to them and not to adults. In terms of the target readers, children's literature can be distinguished between children's literature for children's, middle and final grade or high school readers. Children's literature generally includes prose and poetry. Puryanto (2008) in (Ginting, 2021) children's poetry uses more beauty, a combination of linguistic sounds, choice of words and expressions, while the content is an expression of feelings describing objects or events that are appropriate to the child's developmental level. Children's literature is not only intended for children as readers but is also written with attention to child developmental psychology.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that children's poetry, as seen in *Hal yang Pribadi* by M. Fatan DZ, can represent children's selfhood through simple yet meaningful language. Using Barthes' semiotic theory, the poems convey not only literal meanings but also reflect cultural and ideological values. Children emerge as reflective subjects shaped by subtle social norms. Poems like "Pagiku Hilang" and "Suatu Garis" illustrate how personal experiences and simple objects such as a line can become reflective symbols of life and identity. The use of pronouns like "I" and "we" shows how children's voices fluctuate between freedom and constraints imposed by adult values. The strength of this study lies in its ability to read children's poetry as both a space for self-expression and a reflection of social norms, while its limitation is the small number of poems analyzed in depth and the lack of direct responses from child readers. Future research could compare



children's poems written by children and those written by adults to explore how children's voices are formed, framed, or represented through external lenses. Ultimately, children's literature is vital as an educational medium that conveys moral values, fosters empathy, enhances imagination, and promotes diversity and character building.

Ethics statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in the preparation, writing, or publication of this article. All stages of the research were conducted independently, based on academic initiative, without any financial, institutional, or personal influence that could compromise the objectivity of the study. The selection of the research subject, namely the poetry collection *Hal yang Pribadi* by M. Fatan DZ, was made solely on academic grounds, particularly its aesthetic value and thematic relevance to the focus of Barthes' symbolic semiotics. Accordingly, scientific integrity was strictly upheld throughout the research process, including in the design, analysis, and interpretation of the findings.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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