


# Swear Words as Sociolinguistic Tools of Social Criticism in Jawaban Alina by Seno Gumira Ajidarma

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## A B S T R A C T

This study examines swear words as a form of social criticism in the short story "Jawaban Alina" by Seno Gumira Ajidarma, read by Dian Sastrowardoyo. Swear words, generally considered rude and impolite, may serve both aesthetic and rhetorical functions in literature. The data were collected from a transcription of the spoken performance, analyzed using qualitative content analysis within a sociolinguistic framework. The study specifically investigates how swear words function as linguistic strategies of resistance and emotional expression that reflect social inequality. The results show that swear words in this short story function as expressions of protest, emotional assertion, and satire against social injustice. The analysis highlights the connection between sociolinguistic theory and social criticism, emphasizing that linguistic choice can reveal social tension and ideological struggle in literary texts.

**Keywords:** *Swearing, Social Criticism, Short Story, Sociolinguistics.*

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## INTRODUCTION

A cerpen (short story) is a literary work with a relatively short narrative. It is often described as a story that can be read in one sitting. A short story usually focuses on a single conflict or issue and includes only a few characters. According to Amalia and Fadhilasari (2022), a short story is a brief prose narrative that portrays part of a character's life. It often contains emotional tension, meaningful events, and memorable messages. Jacob (2001) also states that a short story is a short piece of fiction meant to be finished in one sitting. It typically presents one meaning, one crisis, and one emotional effect. The short story offers a focused message and avoids complex plots, settings, and characters like those in novels due to its limited length.

Besides plot and character, short stories also reflect different language styles. These may include formal, casual, intimate, colloquial, or even vulgar expressions, such as swearing. Language variation plays an important role in building the author's style and developing the narrative. For this reason, it is worth examining more deeply to uncover the hidden meanings behind word choices. One interesting form of language in this context is swearing, as seen in Seno Gumira Ajidarma's *Jawaban Alina*.

According to Sitompul (2024), swearing involves harsh or obscene words usually spoken when someone is angry, upset, or disappointed. Interestingly, swearing is not limited to any specific age group or social background. It appears in the speech of children and adults, from manual workers to lawmakers. The purpose and delivery, however, can differ. This shows that swearing has long been part of human language. Montagu (1967) explained that both swearing and taboo expressions have existed since the earliest forms of communication.

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Hirsch (1985) added that a word can be considered swearing if it refers to taboo topics, cannot be taken literally, and expresses strong emotions or attitudes.

The social environment also affects swearing habits. Boriri (2024) found that teenagers who grow up in communities that use harsh language are more likely to swear, unlike those raised in more controlled and educated settings. While experts may not agree on one clear definition of swearing, Sitompul (2024) suggests that there are shared features. Swearing often expresses emotions, involves taboo words, reflects social stigma, and may be used to offend, assert identity, or even show closeness between speakers.

From a linguistic point of view, swearing includes offensive, vulgar, or taboo words that break social language norms. In today's world, the forms and functions of swearing have changed. It no longer happens only in face-to-face conversation. It now appears in digital media, social platforms, online forums, and entertainment. These changes are influenced by technology, shifting values, and cultural or political developments.

Although swearing often has negative meanings, it is not always received negatively. In many cases, swearing is part of more complex social interactions. For example, friendly swearing can show emotional closeness. It may also serve as group identity, emotional release, or even humor. The word *jancuk* in Surabaya, for example, is often used among friends to show solidarity. But in other regions, the same word may be seen as offensive. This shows that swearing should be understood not only by its form but also by its social context. This includes the situation, relationship between speakers, cultural background, and the social impact of the words used.

For this reason, a sociolinguistic approach is useful. It helps us understand how language and society are connected. A sociolinguistic perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how language is shaped by social structures and how certain expressions, including swearing, carry specific meanings depending on the social context (Coulmas, 2013). Sociolinguistics examines how language varies across different social settings and how it reflects cultural values, group identity, and interpersonal dynamics (Hudson, 2012). This makes it a relevant framework for analyzing swearing that serves as both emotional release and social criticism. Through this lens, swearing is not only a linguistic form. It is also a social practice that reflects power, cultural values, and identity in daily life.

Several previous studies have explored swearing within a sociolinguistic context. Research by Suhendar (2011), Wibowo (2020), and Manurung et al. (2023), for instance, focused primarily on the forms, functions, and references of swearing in spoken language or everyday conversation, whether in Indonesian or regional languages. Meanwhile, Novita and Adek (2022) examined swearing in social media as a form of digital linguistic expression within online community interactions. However, no study to date has specifically investigated swearing in literary texts as a form of social critique – let alone in a performative reading by a public figure. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the short story *Jawaban Alina* by Seno Gumira Ajidarma, as performed by Dian Sastrowardoyo, through a critical sociolinguistic approach. Swearing in this short story is not merely seen as emotional expression but also as a discursive strategy that reflects resistance against social inequality, symbolic violence, and patriarchal domination. Thus, this study broadens the scope of sociolinguistic inquiry into swearing by situating it within the realm of literature and performativity, and by highlighting the ideological function of language as a tool for social critique.

Studying swear words in Indonesian literature is important because it reveals how language embodies social realities, power relations, and cultural attitudes. In Indonesian literary tradition, authors such as Seno Gumira Ajidarma often employ colloquial or taboo expressions to critique social injustice, bureaucracy, and moral hypocrisy. His works frequently use linguistic realism to expose how everyday speech, especially swearing, reflects deeper ideological tensions within society. Therefore, analyzing swear words in "*Jawaban Alina*" contributes to understanding the intersection between linguistic expression and literary social criticism in Indonesia.

This study explores swearing in the short story *Jawaban Alina*. The story highlights the need to be realistic in relationships and to consider the emotional consequences of our actions. It portrays emotional tension and conflict. In this context, swearing appears as a response to injustice. It functions not only as emotional release but also as a form of protest against social inequality.

Therefore, this study focuses on Swearing as a Form of Social Criticism in *Jawaban Alina*. It aims to explore the linguistic and social aspects of swearing, including its context and sociolinguistic functions.

## METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive method with content and discourse analysis techniques. The primary data consist of swear words identified in the transcript of “*Jawaban Alina*” as performed by Dian Sastrowardoyo. Data collection involved close reading, transcription, and categorization of swear words based on form, reference, and function. The analysis followed Miles and Huberman’s (1994) model of qualitative analysis: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The object of this study is the spoken transcript of *Jawaban Alina*, read expressively by Dian Sastrowardoyo and published digitally on the YouTube channel SPASI on March 21, 2020. The researcher analyzed instances of swearing in the performance as expressions of language with social and cultural significance. The analysis also includes identifying the forms and references of each swearing utterance. This process refers to sociolinguistic approach that view language as a part of social practice, where the use of certain expressions—such as swearing—reflects the speaker’s identity, emotions, and social position (Holmes, 2013; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015).

The data in this study consist of utterances categorized as swearing based on their usage in the narrative. The analysis considers key aspects of sociolinguistic study, including the social function of language, power relations among characters, and the speech situations that frame the use of swearing. In addition, the study explores pragmatic and emotional dimensions of swearing—specifically, how meaning and impact are shaped by social context (Lakoff, 2004; Jay, 2009). This research applies an interactional sociolinguistic approach, where meaning is not interpreted only lexically but also through the social relationships between speakers and the values and norms of their community (Gumperz, 1982).

A sociolinguistic framework was applied to interpret how linguistic choices in swearing reflect social relations, identity, and power dynamics, while a literary stylistic approach was used to analyze their aesthetic and rhetorical roles. In this context, swearing is not viewed only as a negative expression. It can also serve as a tool to express closeness, resistance, or social protest, depending on the communicative situation and character relationships in the story. The primary data source is the audio recording of the short story performance, which was fully transcribed for analysis. This study aims not only to identify the forms of swearing but also to understand their meaning within the social context and their communicative functions.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Forms and References of Swearing

Swearing is a type of emotional expression often used in social interaction to release feelings of anger, frustration, or disappointment, and sometimes as a form of social criticism. In literary contexts, especially in the short story *Jawaban Alina*—swearing does not always appear in vulgar or direct forms. It often emerges symbolically, through irony or sarcasm. This suggests that swearing in literary texts can function as more than just emotional expression. It can also act as an ideological tool and a representation of socio-cultural conflict.

Wijana (2004) explains that swearing is a negative emotional expression used to insult or degrade someone or something, either directly or indirectly. He classifies swearing based

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on two main aspects: form and reference. The form of swearing refers to the linguistic structure used in the utterance. This may appear as nouns, verbs, noun phrases, exclamatory sentences, or metaphors. The reference of swearing involves the subject or object being referred to. These may include body parts, animals, professions, physical conditions, or certain social statuses used to lower the dignity or insult the target.

In Jawaban Alina, as performed by Dian Sastrowardoyo, several utterances containing swearing are found, both explicit and implicit. These instances can be classified based on their form and reference, as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Forms and References of Swearing Utterances

No.	Swearing Utterance	Form	Reference Type	Timestamp	Explanation
1	<i>Senja sialan yang paling tidak mungkin diharapkan manusia.</i>	Word	Situation (SR)	2:36-2:40	A curse toward a symbol of time, losing its usual positive meaning.
2	<i>Karena tukang pos yang jahil itu rupanya penasaran...</i>	Word	Action (AR)	2:50-2:56	Negative judgment on someone's disturbing behavior.
3	<i>Buset.</i>	Word	Situation (SR)	4:54-5:51	A spontaneous reaction to an unexpected or extreme situation.
4	<i>Ini semua gara-gara kamu, Sukab.</i>	Word	Action (AR)	7:41-7:42	Direct blaming for the occurrence of a problem.
5	<i>...hanya dengan begitu kamu akan selamat dari perasaan cintamu yang tolol itu.</i>	Word	Body & Thought (BR)	11:49-11:54	Swearing targeting cognitive emotion, portraying love as foolish.
6	<i>Senja paling tidak berharga dalam hidupku, Sukab.</i>	Phrase	Situation (SR)	2:31-2:35	A devaluation of the symbol of dusk as merely sentimental.
7	<i>Apakah ia kawin, beranak-pinak, dan berbahagia?</i>	Phrase	Kinship (KR)	8:03-8:07	Sarcasm toward someone's family status and life choices.
8	<i>Dasar bego, dikasih isyarat tidak mau mengerti.</i>	Phrase	Body & Thought (BR)	11:09-11:15	Swearing targeting stupidity and insensitivity.
9	<i>Aku tidak sudi berhubungan dengan kamu, Sukab.</i>	Phrase	Action (AR)	13:22-13:26	Strong rejection of a relationship; expressing emotional distance.
10	<i>Sukab yang malang, bodoh, dan tidak pakai otak.</i>	Clause	Situation, Body & Thought (SR, BR)	7:45-7:52	A complex insult targeting condition and intelligence.
11	<i>Dasar laki-laki tidak tahu diri.</i>	Clause	Kinship (KR)	10:13-10:27	A sweeping judgment toward male character in general.
12	<i>Sukab yang malang, goblok dan menyebalkan.</i>	Clause	Situation (SR)	10:29-10:34	Layered swearing that combines emotional and intellectual critique.
13	<i>Makanya jangan terlalu banyak berkhayal, Sukab. Pakai otak sedikit...</i>	Clause	Body & Thought (BR)	11:43-11:48	Criticism of imagination; attacking thinking ability.
14	<i>Tapi kamulah yang tidak tahu diri, mengirim senja tanpa kira-kira.</i>	Clause	Body & Thought (BR)	13:34-13:38	Highlights lack of empathy and poor reasoning.
15	<i>Sukab yang malang, paling malang, dan akan selalu malang.</i>	Clause	Situation (SR)	15:34-15:40	Repeated emphasis on the character's suffering; existential insult.

Swearing in the form of single words in *Jawaban Alina* tends to be direct and compact. These words carry frustration or anger toward a situation or individual. For example the word “sialan” in “Senja sialan...” expresses anger toward the symbol of dusk which, in this context, no longer suggests beauty but emotional emptiness. Other words such as “tolol” and “buset” show swearing aimed at intelligence and surprise. These are common in informal contexts. Swearing toward circumstances arises when conditions fall short of expectations, thus spoken as a form of frustration release (Wijana, 2010).

For instance, in the utterance “*Dasar bego, dikasih isyarat tidak mau mengerti*”, the swear word “*bego*” functions as a social critique aimed at ignorance and insensitivity. It demonstrates how emotional expression overlaps with a moral evaluation of the interlocutor. Another example, “*Laki-laki tidak tahu diri*”, reflects patriarchal criticism and the speaker’s resistance toward male dominance. These examples illustrate that swearing in the story operates as a form of social commentary rather than mere verbal aggression.

Phrasal swearing tends to be more contextual and evaluative. For example the phrase “*dasar bego*” shows swearing toward inability to understand social cues. Such a form is categorized as swearing referencing body parts, particularly the brain, which is often used in Indonesian speech culture to judge intelligence. On the other hand the phrase “*aku tidak sudi berhubungan dengan kamu*” consists of interpersonal swearing that expresses total rejection of the interlocutor’s existence, reflecting a sharp relational conflict.

Swearing in clause form becomes a medium for the speaker to build deeper narrative of insult. For instance the clause “*Sukab yang malang, bodoh, dan tidak pakai otak*” contains a combination of swearing toward life condition (situation reference) and thinking ability (body/thought reference). Use of such complex structure shows that swearing is not merely spontaneous but also reflective of the psychological tension of the character. Clause-form swearing often signals higher levels of anger and emotional pressure because the speaker constructs it consciously (Holmes, 2013).

### **Swearing as a Vehicle of Social Criticism**

The short story “*Jawaban Alina*” by Seno Gumira Ajidarma, as narrated by Dian Sastrowardoyo, contains several instances of swearing that carry distinctive social meanings and functions. In this story, swearing is not merely an expression of negative emotion. It also reflects social relations, resistance to authority, and the formation of character identity, as illustrated in the following data.

- (1) “Kamu tahulah, Sukab, anak-anak di daerah bukit kapur begini itu tidak punya mainan yang aneh-aneh seperti di kota. Mereka hanya tahu kambing dan kerbau, ikan dan belut, sungai dan jagung. Mereka nasi saja jarang meraka sentuh. Anak-anak yang tidak pernah tahu mainan robot berjalan dengan cahaya di adanya yang berkedip-kedip, pasti akan penasaran sekalilah dengan cahaya senja yang memancar berkilauan, berkilauan, merah dan keemas-emasan itu, Sukab.”

(5.09-5.47, SPASI, 2020)

In Dian Sastrowardoyo’s reading, the passage is delivered with a mocking, cynical, and disgusted tone. Although it does not include lexical swearing such as “*bastard*” or “*stupid*”, the tone and vocal expression produce an implicit act of swearing directed toward a specific social group—children from remote limestone hill villages. In sociolinguistic studies, swearing does not always appear in overtly harsh words. Culpeper (1996) and Holmes (2013) argue that intonation, register, and social context can transform ordinary utterances into socially or emotionally offensive speech. In this context, the mocking tone reinforces the utterance’s function as verbal aggression. The statement in excerpt (1) indirectly swears at poverty by ridiculing the curiosity of rural children toward nature, which serves as their only form of entertainment. By uttering “*senja yang berkilauan*” in a scornful manner, the speaker diminishes the simple happiness that belongs to the children of the village.

The narration presents a sharp contrast between the lives of children in remote rural areas and those in the city. Rural children are familiar only with natural elements and basic necessities such as goats, buffaloes, fish, eels, rivers, and corn. The mention that they rarely eat

rice implicitly points to economic hardship and food insecurity. This depiction reflects the structural inequality between urban and rural spaces, often ignored in the discourse of development. Seno describes the lower-class condition in a poetic yet piercing way, showing that poverty is not only economic but also cultural. Access to toys, technology, and imagination represents what Bourdieu (1984) terms *cultural capital*. Urban children possess access to technology such as robot toys with lights, while rural children can only gaze at the sunset as their source of wonder. This reveals a deprivation of symbolic experience that shapes social and psychological development.

Excerpt (1) carries a deep layer of social critique. It exposes structural poverty, cultural inequality, and the experiential gap between urban and rural children. Seno conveys this not through explicit swearing but through irony, poetic reflection, and emotional description. The long, rhythmic sentences and the repetition “berkilauan, berkilauan” intensify the sense of innocent admiration mixed with sorrow. The syntax creates a lyrical and contemplative tone, as if the speaker were whispering a bitter truth to Sukab rather than merely complaining.

- (2) “Atau, apakah di dunia ini sebetulnya seperti didalam amplop ya, Sukab. Di mana kita tidak tahu apa yang berada di luar diri kita, di mana kita merasa hidup penuh dengan makna padahal yang menonton kita tertawa-tawa sambil berkata, “Ah, kasihan betul manusia.”  
(8.36-9.00, SPASI, 2020)

In excerpt (2), the word “kasihan” literally expresses sympathy for another’s suffering or limitation. However, in this context, the phrase “kasihan betul manusia” is not spoken from empathy but from an evaluative and superior position. The utterance is delivered by “yang menonton kita,” an entity external to human existence, which can be interpreted as God, a foreign force, or even a social structure mocking humanity. This implicit form of swearing represents a kind of cosmic irony, in which humans believe their lives have meaning while, from an external view, they appear naïve and ignorant. Hence, “kasihan” becomes a form of mockery that belittles human existence. As Culpeper (1996) notes, expressions like “kasihan” can function as sarcasm or mock politeness when used to ridicule rather than to sympathize. In this instance, “kasihan” carries not only interpersonal but also existential and social dimensions. Humans live “di dalam amplop,” a metaphor for limited perception and ignorance. They think their lives are meaningful, but from the outside, they seem small and laughable. This may also be interpreted as a critique of the lower or oppressed classes, who live in suffering while holding onto false meanings and becoming the object of amusement for the elite or dominant system.

The word “kasihan” at the end of the passage intensifies the tragic yet cynical tone of the story. It creates a contemplative atmosphere that exposes the arrogance of human beings who believe their existence holds significance in the universe. Within the narrative of the short story, this is the moment of existential reflection in which the character feels subdued by unseen powers and begins to question reality through language. From a sociolinguistic perspective, excerpt (2) represents an implicit form of swearing used to criticize human pride and limitation.

From a broader sociolinguistic view, the meaning of “kasihan” depends heavily on social context, interpersonal relations, and intonation. Denotatively, the word expresses empathy or compassion. Yet in “Jawaban Alina”, it functions as a judgment from a superior position. It is uttered by a collective subject, “yang menonton kita,” symbolically situated outside the character’s life. This creates a social distance between the observer and the observed. Consequently, “kasihan” becomes a linguistic tool that reinforces social hierarchy.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987) in their theory of Politeness Strategies, such utterances can function as face-threatening acts (FTA) disguised through neutral diction. Although they may sound polite, they emphasize the inferiority of those being described. The utterance also acts as a form of social labeling – “kasihan” becomes a label for humans seen as ignorant, weak, or powerless before greater forces. This illustrates how dominant ideologies are embedded in language, granting those in power the authority to define and judge others. Therefore, the use of “kasihan” in excerpt (2) demonstrates how language can sustain symbolic

domination while simultaneously offering a critique of how society normalizes inequality through seemingly ordinary speech.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study examines swearing as a linguistic phenomenon in literary works that not only reflects emotional expression but also represents social dynamics and criticism of structural inequality. Based on the analysis of Seno Gumira Ajidarma's short story "Jawaban Alina", as narrated by Dian Sastrowardoyo, the findings show that swearing in the text functions not merely as an expression of anger or insult but as a deliberate rhetorical instrument used to express protest, irony, and resistance toward unequal social realities. Swearing appears in various linguistic forms – ranging from words and phrases to clauses – with references that reveal the social, emotional, and intellectual conditions of the characters. Even in its implicit forms, such as irony or cynical tone, swearing carries a strong charge of social critique. Through a sociolinguistic lens, swearing in this short story can be understood as a reflection of social relations, power dynamics, and cultural values embedded within society. This research affirms that swearing in literary works possesses not only a linguistic function but also a critical social role. It serves as a means to challenge, reflect upon, and question social conditions, thereby positioning language as an active medium of resistance and awareness within literature. Beyond its linguistic and literary dimensions, this study implies that swearing serves as a symbolic form of discourse that mirrors power structures and cultural ideology in Indonesian society. Future sociolinguistic and literary studies can further explore how taboo language functions as resistance, identity construction, or narrative realism in modern Indonesian fiction.

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