

Literature as Social Critique: Examining Class Struggle and Inequality in Contemporary Indonesian Fiction

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

Literature serves not only as an aesthetic medium, but also as a reflection and critique of complex social realities. This article aims to examine how contemporary Indonesian fictional literary works represent class struggles and social inequality as part of the discourse of social criticism. This research uses a qualitative approach with a library research method on a number of post-reform Indonesian novels that raise the theme of poverty, marginalization, and structural inequality. The analysis was carried out by utilizing social criticism theory and literary sociology approaches to identify narratives of resistance, power, and inequality that appear in literary texts. The results of the study show that these works not only voice the socio-economic conditions of marginalized groups, but also offer a space for readers to re-reflect on the unequal social structure. Indonesian contemporary fiction writers use characters, plots, and settings as narrative strategies to raise social issues symbolically and ideologically. Thus, literature plays a role as a tool for transforming social consciousness that is able to penetrate the formal boundaries of education and mainstream media. This article recommends the need to strengthen interdisciplinary studies between literature and social sciences to better understand the relationship between texts, society, and social change in contemporary Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is a reflection of the social dynamics of society and plays an important role as a medium of criticism of unjust social realities (Eagleton, 2005). In the Indonesian context, literary works have long been a forum for expression and resistance to social inequality, especially in depicting class tensions between the elite and marginalized groups (Damono, 2002). The representation of social conflict in literature not only reflects the objective conditions of society, but

also stimulates the reader's critical awareness of the unequal power structure (Fokkema & Kunne-Ibsch, 1998).

Literature as social criticism is an approach that positions literary works not only as aesthetic products, but also as symbolic representations of social, political, and cultural realities. In this perspective, literary works are understood as a reflection of inequality, injustice, and structural tensions experienced by society. As stated by Eagleton (2005), literature has an ideological capacity that allows readers to see the structures of domination and power that are often hidden in everyday life. Through narrative, dialogue, and symbolism, the author conveys criticism of the established social order in an imaginative way but full of political meaning.

One of the important aspects of literature as social criticism is its ability to represent class struggles and the dynamics of power relations. In many works of fiction, characters from the lower classes are depicted experiencing various forms of oppression, exploitation, or marginalization, reflecting systemic inequality in society. This representation aims not only to express suffering, but also to build empathy and critical awareness of the reader's reality. As explained by Goldmann (1975), the structure of literary works is inseparable from the social structure of the author and his society. Thus, literature becomes a tool that is able to articulate the collective experience of marginalized groups and problematic oppressive social structures.

In the Indonesian context, literature has long been a channel of expression of criticism of social injustice, starting from the colonial era to the post-reformasi era. The works of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, for example, are classic examples of how literature was used to challenge feudal and colonial structures. In the contemporary era, writers such as Okky Madasari, Eka Kurniawan, and Laksmi Pamuntjak continue this tradition by exploring issues such as poverty, class inequality, and state repression within a strong narrative framework. In this way, contemporary Indonesian literature serves not only as social documentation, but also as a form of cultural resistance that highlights the tensions between power structures and marginalized voices.

However, academic studies that highlight the role of contemporary Indonesian literature as a social critique of class inequality are still relatively limited, especially those that directly link fictional narratives to post-reform economic-political dynamics (Kleden, 2018). Most previous research has emphasized the aesthetic aspects of literature or thematic studies that are descriptive, without exploring the ideological dimensions involved in the narrative construction of social inequality (Faruk, 2015; Hidayat, 2020).

This research is important because since the reform era, there has been a shift in the orientation of Indonesian literature which not only functions as a cultural expression, but also as a discursive space to articulate structural injustices and social class realities (Wiyatmi, 2011; Aveling, 2016). Increasingly sharp economic inequality and social marginalization in Indonesia's urban and rural societies have provided a new context for the emergence of narratives of class struggle in contemporary novels (World Bank, 2020; BPS, 2022).

This research aims to analyze how contemporary Indonesian fiction voices criticism of social inequality and class struggles through character construction, setting, and narrative conflicts. Using a qualitative approach based on literature study, this study examines in depth literary works that represent the socio-economic conditions of the post-New Order. This approach allows for a more holistic understanding of the relationship between literary texts, social structures, and political-economic changes (Goldmann, 1975; Gramsci, 1971).

The main contribution of this research lies in the effort to fill the study gap that positions literature as a reflective and critical instrument of class structure in contemporary Indonesian society. This research not only enriches the treasure of literary studies, but is also relevant to the

study of sociology, politics, and social policy. Thus, literature is not solely a cultural artifact, but also an instrument of social criticism that is active in shaping collective consciousness.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with the type of library research, which aims to analyze contemporary Indonesian literary works as a medium of social criticism against class inequality and the struggle of marginalized groups. Literature studies were chosen because they allow researchers to explore the social meanings contained in literary texts in depth through narrative and contextual analysis (George, 2008; Moleong, 2019).

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data is in the form of a number of contemporary Indonesian novels that contain representations of class conflict and social inequality, including *Entrok* by Okky Madasari, *Cantik itu Luka* by Eka Kurniawan, and *Amba* by Laksmi Pamuntjak. The three works were chosen purposively because they contain a narrative structure that raises social, economic, and political issues relevant to the context of post-reform Indonesia. Secondary data were obtained from scientific journal articles, literary theory books, notes of literary criticism, and social policy documents that support the interpretation of literary texts.

The data collection technique was carried out through a search of scientific literature and systematic documentation of the literature being studied. The researcher notes and classifies important parts of the narrative that contain elements of social criticism, such as the depiction of economic inequality, power relations between social classes, and ideological conflicts in storylines and dialogues between characters.

The data analysis method used is qualitative content analysis with a literary sociology approach. The analysis process is carried out through three main stages, namely: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). In this process, researchers use the perspectives of social criticism theory and narrative structure theory to uncover how social inequality is represented and criticized in literary texts. Thus, this method allows researchers to understand the relationship between fictitious constructions in literary works and the social reality in which they appear.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Representation of Social Class and Power Relations in Literary Texts

In contemporary Indonesian literary works, the depiction of social class is not merely a background or narrative element, but also acts as an ideological instrument that articulates structural inequality symbolically and politically. Social class in fictional texts is presented as a living, dynamic, and conflict-ridden relation, rather than as a static category. Literature is a representation space for various forms of social inequality that are often not discussed in formal or institutional discourse. This representation is not only intended to depict social reality, but also to reframe the reader's perspective on the structure of society and the hierarchy of power that has been considered reasonable (Eagleton, 2005).

One of the most prominent examples is the novel *Entrok* by Okky Madasari, in which the main character Sumarni is portrayed as a woman from the lower class who grew up under the authoritarian regime of the New Order. It experienced economic, political, and social repression in various forms—from structural poverty, symbolic violence by the military, to limited access to education and bodily autonomy (Madasari, 2010). This inequality is not just a narrative setting, but

is at the heart of the conflict and character dynamics, which reflects the hegemonic relationship between the state and the small people. In this context, Gramsci (1971) emphasized the importance of understanding hegemony as a power that works not only coercively, but also through the approval and internalization of values by the subjugated group. Literature such as *Entrok* is a space to disrupt this hegemony by showing the hidden side of repression and resistance.

The criticism of the class structure is also very sharp in *Beautiful That Luka* by Eka Kurniawan. The novel depicts the lives of women from the lower social classes in a brutal colonial and postcolonial landscape. The character of Dewi Ayu and her descendants are not only victims of physical violence, but also symbolic violence legitimized by patriarchal norms and unequal social class (Kurniawan, 2002). The power relations in this text work in two complementary domains: economics and gender. As Bourdieu (1991) argues, symbolic power operates by making dominance seem natural and legitimate, through habitus internalized by individuals and society. Thus, social criticism in this text targets not only economic structures, but also cultural norms that underpin gender and class dominance.

In the approach to literary sociology, as developed by Goldmann (1975), literary texts are collective products that reflect the consciousness of a particular class in society. The representation of class in the text is not an artistic coincidence, but rather a manifestation of a real social contradiction in everyday life. Thus, contemporary Indonesian novels not only map the suffering of the lower classes, but also reveal the structure of the conflict and the resistance that accompanies it. This is in line with the ideological criticism proposed by Faruk (2015), that literature can be an ideological arena where various social meanings are fought, questioned, and reproduced.

The social criticism in these works is not reactive, but builds a reflective and progressive narrative consciousness. The representation of social class is consciously arranged by the author to present an alternative reality that disturbs the comfort of readers, especially those from the middle and upper classes. Literature, in this case, not only functions as a mirror of society, but also as a tool for social transformation (Damono, 2002). It activates the potential for reflection and empathy for those who have been excluded from the dominant narrative. As Wiyatmi (2011) emphasizes, literature is a form of cultural resistance that goes beyond mere aesthetics, because it helps to shape collective consciousness and becomes a medium of symbolic struggle for economically and socially marginalized groups.

Thus, in the context of contemporary Indonesian fiction, the depiction of social class is a narrative and political strategy directed at dismantling and deconstructing an unequal social order. Literary works become an alternative articulation field to social and economic domination, as well as open up a more egalitarian space for discourse in reinterpreting the subject's position in society. These narratives are not only important as social documents, but also as discursive practices that expand the space for democratization of discourse and challenge the naturalization of power in the life of modern Indonesian society (Goldmann, 1975; Eagleton, 2005; Gramsci, 1971).

Economic Inequality and Marginalization in Urban and Rural Narratives

Economic inequality has become one of the main themes in post-reform Indonesian literature, reflecting the complexity of social, economic, and political relations that have continued to develop since the end of the New Order. In this context, literature is not only a medium of aesthetic expression, but also a tool of social criticism that challenges the structure of inequality in society. The novel *Amba* by Laksmi Pamuntjak, for example, offers an in-depth view of economic inequality that is closely related to the political power structure during the New Order period and the tragedy of 1965 (Pamuntjak, 2012). Through a rich historical narrative, the novel raises a sharp distinction

between the bureaucratic elite who enjoy access to power and wealth and ordinary people who are often marginalized from basic rights, including justice and social mobility.

The inequality depicted in *Amba* encompasses more than just material imbalances. This novel also describes how access to information and education is an instrument of power that further emphasizes the social gap. This context is in line with the World Bank report (2020) which shows that economic inequality in Indonesia does not only occur in the dimension of income distribution, but also in access to social resources and economic opportunities. Literature, in this case, becomes a symbolic space to reflect on how economic and political power are closely intertwined in creating a sustainable structure of injustice.

1) Inequality in an Urban Context: Living in the Shadow of Capitalism

In urban areas, the theme of inequality often appears in works depicting the life of the urban working class. Contemporary novels such as those by Afrizal Malna and Seno Gumira Ajidarma highlight the daily struggles of urban people trapped in an exploitative capitalistic system. These representations often focus on the pressures of living faced by the working class, social marginalization, and alienation experienced by rapid urbanization.

The Central Statistics Agency (BPS) (2022) noted that urbanization in Indonesia has reached a very high level, but it has not been accompanied by equal distribution of welfare. This is reflected in literary works that show how the urban working class has to struggle in the midst of limited access to decent housing, quality education, and social security. In the work of Seno Gumira Ajidarma, for example, the characters are often portrayed as victims of the larger system, living in stressful situations but still trying to maintain their dignity. Literature, in this context, is a medium to sue structural injustices that occur in urbanization centers.

2) Inequality in Rural Narratives: Modern Feudalism and Structural Dependency

In contrast, in rural narratives, inequality often emerges in the form of patron-client relationships, modern feudalism, and structural dependence on local elites who control economic resources. Literature set in rural areas, as studied by George (2008), shows how the power structures that exist in rural areas are often not directly visible but have a great impact on people's lives.

Rural narratives in Indonesia often depict an unequal power relationship between landowners or local rulers and small farmers. This inequality is exacerbated by neoliberal development projects that, instead of bringing prosperity, often widen the economic gap between the rich and the poor. In many cases, literary works such as novels and poems become important tools to express society's resistance to these power dynamics.

3) Literature as a Tool for Criticism and Inequality Mapping

In both urban and rural narratives, post-reform Indonesian literature represents socio-economic inequality not as a passive condition, but as the result of structural relations that can be questioned and challenged. In Eagleton's (2005) view, literature has the power to change people's perceptions of their social conditions, reveal hidden realities, and give a voice to marginalized groups.

Literature, especially in the Indonesian context, has become an important medium to map the face of inequality that is often not raised by the dominant media. Fokkema & Kunne-Ibsch (1998) mentioned that literature can be a reflective medium that helps readers understand the complexity of social dynamics, including the inequalities that exist in them. In this regard, literature serves not

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only as a mirror of reality, but also as a tool to challenge oppressive structures, provide new perspectives, and inspire social change. Through the social criticism contained in literary works, the theme of inequality becomes more than just a narrative, it becomes a tool of change that voices the aspirations and expectations of people who have been marginalized by unjust economic and political dynamics.

Narrative of Resistance and Ideological Subversion in Character Construction

One of the main characteristics of literature as a social critique is its ability to present a narrative of resistance to an oppressive system. Characters in contemporary Indonesian novels are often constructed as agents who are aware of their subordinate position and seek to oppose it, both directly and symbolically (Kleden, 2018). In *Entrok*, Sumarni as the main character is not only a victim, but also a resistor against the military regime and patriarchal culture (Madasari, 2010).

The narrative of resistance is also seen in the character of Dewi Ayu from *Cantik Itu Luka*, who chooses to redefine her body and identity in the midst of colonial and domestic violence. As explained by Butler (1990), resistance to the system does not always occur in the form of direct confrontation, but can be through subversive practices against dominant norms. Literature, in this context, provides space for articulation for strategies of symbolic resistance.

The intertextual approach also shows that many Indonesian novels insert historical and mythological references as narrative strategies to disrupt the structure of domination and foster collective consciousness. This reinforces Gramsci's (1971) view that hegemony always faces counter-hegemonic forms, one of which is through subversive cultural narratives. In literary texts, this subversion is expressed through dialogue, symbols, and plots that go against the logic of domination.

By framing the characters as subjects who are active in the struggle for their dignity and identity, the novels present literature as a gentle but effective political tool. The ideological resistance carried out through fictional characters gives readers the opportunity to re-evaluate the social structures they experience, expanding the realm of ethical and political reflection (Goldmann, 1975; Faruk, 2015).

Literature and Critical Consciousness: Social and Cultural Implications

The main function of social criticism in literature is its ability to stimulate readers' critical awareness of unequal social realities. Through fictional narratives, readers are invited to experience, understand, and re-evaluate prevailing social structures, including class hierarchies, power systems, and dominant ideologies (Eagleton, 2005). This is in line with Freire's (1970) opinion on the role of narrative in consciousness education and liberation.

Literature is also a transformative tool that bridges the gap between elitist knowledge and the experience of ordinary people. The representation of the lives of marginalized communities in literary works contributes to the formation of social empathy, which is the foundation for more just social change (Bourdieu, 1991). In this context, literature functions as a cultural practice that is able to disrupt the hegemonic narrative of the state and the market.

The implications of these findings show that contemporary literary works have not only aesthetic value, but also significant social and political value. By voicing structural issues such as class inequality, literature encourages the creation of a more inclusive and reflective public space (Fokkema & Kunne-Ibsch, 1998). This is important in the Indonesian context, where the democratization of public discourse still faces challenges from media oligarchs and cultural homogenization. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of reading literature as a field for

meaning contestation and as a cultural strategy to build a fairer alternative discourse. Literature is both a mirror and a tool of change: it not only reflects the world, but also has the potential to change the way we interpret it (Eagleton, 2005; Goldmann, 1975).

CONCLUSION

This research confirms that Indonesian contemporary fiction literature plays an important role as a medium of reflection and criticism of social reality, especially in representing class struggles and social inequality. Through a qualitative approach and literary sociology analysis, it was found that post-reform Indonesian literary works succeeded in depicting the narrative of resistance, marginalization, and structural inequality in society. Characters, storylines, and settings are used strategically by writers to convey deep and ideological social critiques.

These works not only give a voice to marginalized groups, but also open up space for readers to reflect on the unequal socio-economic structure and its consequences on people's lives. Literature becomes a tool for transforming consciousness that transcends the formal boundaries of education and mainstream media, offering a fresh and critical perspective on complex social issues.

As a medium that connects texts and society, literature has great potential to influence social change. Therefore, it is important to strengthen the interdisciplinary study between literature and social sciences in order to deepen the understanding of the relationship between literary texts, the structure of society, and the dynamics of social change in Indonesia. By integrating literary discourse into broader social analysis, it is hoped that literature can continue to be a tool for building critical awareness and promoting social justice.

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