

Sociology of Literature Approach in the Novel *Laut Bercerita* by Laila S. Chudori

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ABSTRACT

This study employs a sociological approach to analyze *Laut Bercerita*, a novel by Leila S. Chudori that explores Indonesia's socio-political struggles during the 1998 Reformation era. The research examines how the novel reflects systemic political oppression, human rights abuses, and the collective resistance of activists against an authoritarian regime. Using a qualitative descriptive method, this study focuses on the experiences of Biru Laut, the central character, whose story highlights the sacrifices made by individuals fighting for democracy, freedom of expression, and justice. Despite facing state-sanctioned violence, including torture and enforced disappearances, the novel illustrates the activists' persistent struggle against oppression. The findings reveal that *Laut Bercerita* serves as a medium for social critique, exposing state control mechanisms and their impact on individuals and families of the disappeared. Through its vivid depictions, the novel compels readers to acknowledge the human cost of authoritarian governance. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the role of literature in reflecting societal struggles, fostering historical awareness, and advocating for human rights. By intertwining personal and collective suffering, *Laut Bercerita* underscores the fragility of freedom and the enduring necessity of resisting authoritarianism.

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INTRODUCTION

The novel *Laut Bercerita* by Laila S. Chudori offers a poignant exploration of Indonesia's turbulent Reformation era in 1998, a period marked by significant social and political upheaval. During this time, activists like Laut and his contemporaries faced intense oppression under the authoritarian "*Orde Baru*" regime (Sijabat et al., 2024). Chudori's narrative delves into critical issues such as political repression, state-sponsored violence, and the intricate social dynamics that defined the era. Central to the novel are the experiences of student activists who championed reform, advocated for freedom of expression, and fought for human rights amidst escalating constraints.

By intricately weaving historical and socio-political contexts into the storyline, Chudori enables readers to grasp not only the personal struggles of characters like Laut but also the broader societal conditions prevalent in Indonesia during the late 1990s (Rinjani, 2023). Published in December 2017, *Laut Bercerita* continues to resonate with contemporary audiences, underscoring its enduring relevance as many of the social issues it portrays persist despite Indonesia's

proclaimed independence. The novel is lauded for its significant social value, shedding light on the resilience and challenges of activists striving for a more equitable society.

This research adopts a sociology of literature approach to analyze Laut Bercerita, examining how Chudori utilizes literary techniques to reflect and critique the societal structures of her time. Literary sociology (Eagleton, 1988) which investigates the interplay between literary works and societal processes, provides a robust framework for understanding the novel's portrayal of human realities and social institution. By considering both the author's social context and the literature's role as a mirror to society, this study elucidates how Laut Bercerita serves as a medium for social critique and collective memory (Khariza et al., 2025).

Through this sociological lens, the novel not only recounts historical events, such as the abduction of activists in 1998, but also amplifies the voices of those who resisted authoritarianism (Meyriska, 2023). Chudori's inclusion of interviews with survivors further authenticates the narrative, bridging the gap between fiction and historical reality. Consequently, Laut Bercerita not only invites readers to engage with Indonesia's past but also encourages a critical examination of enduring authoritarian tendencies within political systems (Barus et al., 2023).

By employing the sociology of literature approach, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how Laut Bercerita reflects and influences societal perceptions, fostering a collective awareness that transcends its immediate historical context. This study contributes to the broader discourse on the symbiotic relationship between literature and society, highlighting the novel's role in documenting and critiquing the socio-political landscape of Indonesia during a pivotal moment in its history.

METHOD

The research method used in this study is the qualitative descriptive method, which aims to present data as it is, without manipulation or excessive interpretation. According to Siedlecki (2020), "descriptive research means that the data is explained in the form of words or images."

In this study, the phenomenon analyzed is the events during the New Order era in 1998, as depicted in the novel Laut Bercerita. The researcher collected data from the novel, then analyzed and described the phenomenon based on how it was represented by the author.

To ensure a systematic selection of data, specific criteria for selecting quotes and themes were established. First, relevance to sociological themes was a key factor, with priority given to quotes that directly address political oppression, human rights abuses, freedom of expression, and acts of resistance. Passages illustrating state control, censorship, or grassroots activism were included to highlight the novel's social critique. Second, representation of social groups was considered, focusing on how different individuals, including student activists, victims of repression, and their families experienced and responded to state violence. Third, historical accuracy played a significant role, as passages aligning with real-life events from the 1998 Reformasi movement were selected to maintain credibility. Fourth, symbolic and thematic significance guided the selection of excerpts that served as metaphors for power structures, resilience, and the fragility of freedom. Lastly, quotes reflecting emotional and psychological impact were chosen to illustrate the trauma, grief, and resilience of the characters, particularly those affected by political disappearances.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

a. The social context of the author

The author of *Laut Bercerita*, Leila Salikha Chudori was born in Jakarta on December 12, 1962. She studied Political Studies and Comparative Development Studies at Trent University, Canada. Her early works were published in various media when she was just 12 years old. In 1989, Leila published her short story collection *Malam Terakhir*, which was translated into German as *Die Letzte Nacht* (Horlemman Verlag). This book was republished by *Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia* in 2009. That same year, her second short story collection, *9 dari Nadira* (*Kepustakaan*

Populer Gramedia), was released. It went on to win the Literary Award from the Badan Bahasa (Language Agency) a year later. In 2012, Leila published the novel *Pulang*, which has since been translated into English, French, Dutch, German, and Italian. The novel won the Best Prose Award at the 2013 Khatulistiwa Literary Award and was named one of “75 Notable Translations of 2016” by *World Literature Today*.

Pulang, critiques unresolved legal and human rights issues related to the mass killings after the 1965 G30S/PKI incident, militarism, and authoritarianism during the Orde Baru era, while also serving as a reminder of efforts to divide the nation. Following this, Leila released *Namaku Alam*, a historical novel and spin-off of *Pulang*, told from the perspective of Segara Alam. Her novel *Laut Bercerita*, released in December 2017, has been reprinted 45 times and remains a bestseller. In 2020, it was translated into English by John H. McGlynn and published by Penguin Random House SEA. That same year, *Laut Bercerita* won the SEA Write Award.

Based on this social context of the author, Leila S. Chudori’s level of professionalism as a writer is undeniable. Many of her works, such as the novels *Pulang*, *Namaku Alam*, and *Laut Bercerita*, revolve around themes of freedom of expression, human rights, and many more. Through this sociological approach, Leila uses literature as a form of social critique.

b. Literature as a reflection of society

Leila illustrates the condition of Indonesia in 1998. Through this sociological approach, Leila uses literature as a form of social critique.

1) Freedom of Speech

Table 1. Analysis of Freedom of Speech

Social Critiques	Quotation from the Novel	Sociological Analysis
Freedom of Expression	<p><i>"Kita tak ingin selama-lamanya berada di bawah pemerintahan satu orang selama puluhan tahun, Laut. Hanya di negara diktatorial satu orang bisa memerintah begitu lama...seluruh Indonesia dianggap milik keluarga dan kroninya"</i></p> <p><i>"Kita adalah generasi yang harus bergerak, bukan hanya mendiskusikan undang-undang yang mengekang kita selama puluhan tahun di bawa tekanan satu jempol"</i></p> <p><i>"Kita tak bisa hanya menelan informasi yang dilontarkan pemerintah. Mereka bikin sejarah sendiri, kami mencari tahu kebenaran. Kita tak bisa diam saja hanya karena ingin aman"</i></p>	<p>Reflects the collective struggle for democracy and freedom of speech during the “Orde Baru” era. It symbolizes the aspirations of Indonesian society at the time.</p>

"Kita tak ingin selama-lamanya berada di bawah pemerintahan satu orang selama puluhan tahun, Laut. Hanya di negara diktatorial satu orang bisa memerintah begitu lama...seluruh Indonesia dianggap milik keluarga dan kroninya". This quotation underscores the frustration with authoritarian governance during the *Orde Baru* era. The regime, led by President Soeharto for over three decades, was characterized by centralized power, lack of accountability, and suppression of dissent. This shows people’s desire for change to move away from dictatorship and create a fairer system where everyone’s voices matter.

"Kita adalah generasi yang harus bergerak, bukan hanya mendiskusikan undang-undang yang mengekang kita selama puluhan tahun di bawa tekanan satu jempol" This statement reflects the urgent call for youth to act rather than passively accept repressive systems. It portrays a generational responsibility to challenge injustices, particularly laws designed to limit personal and political freedoms. The emphasis on movement highlights the importance of collective action, a defining feature of Indonesia’s Reformasi movement. The youth's role in resisting authoritarian

control and their willingness to fight for reforms.

“*Kita tak bisa hanya menelan informasi yang dilontarkan pemerintah. Mereka bikin sejarah sendiri, kami mencari tahu kebenaran. Kita tak bisa diam saja hanya karena ingin aman*” This critique directly challenges the state's monopoly over information and its manipulation of history to serve political ends. During the *Orde Baru* era, state propaganda was prevalent, and independent media was heavily censored. This quotation reflects the growing awareness among activists of the time, as they sought to uncover the truths suppressed by the regime. It speaks to the broader sociological idea that information control is a key mechanism of maintaining power in authoritarian systems.

2) Humas Rights Abuse

Table 2. Analysis of Human Rights Abuse

Social Critiques	Quotation from the Novel	Sociological Analysis
Human Rights Abuses	<p><i>"Si Mata Merah mendorongku melangkah maju. Mereka menyeringung kedua kakiku dengan besi hingga mustahil bagiku untuk bergerak. Akhirnya salah satu dari mereka menendang betisku. Aku tersungkur. Sekali lagi si perokok itu memegang bahu dari belakang dan memaksaku berlutut".</i></p> <p><i>"Tuhan, kita semakin dekat. Kau terasa semakin ingin menaungiku".</i></p> <p><i>"Pada debur ombak yang kesembilan, terdengar ledakan itu. Tiba-tiba saja aku merasa ada sesuatu yang tajam menembus punggungku. Pedih, perih. Lalu, belakang kepalaku. Seketika aku masih merasakan sebatang kaki bersepatu gerigi yang menendang punggungku. Tubuhku ditarik begitu lekas oleh arus dan bola besi yang terikat pada pergelangan kakiku. Aku melayang-layang ke dasar lautan."</i></p> <p><i>"Kini mereka mengikat tanganku dengan besi pemberat. Tangan kiri. Lalu tangan kanan. Sese kali aku menggeliat, berusaha mencari celah dan kemungkinan meski akan berakhir sia-sia. Aku enggan memberikan tangan dan sengaja mengeraskan kepalaku. Salah satu dari mereka menabok mukaku."</i></p>	<p>Highlights the brutality experienced by activists during the 1998 Reformasi movement.</p>

"Si Mata Merah mendorongku melangkah maju. Mereka menyeringung kedua kakiku dengan besi hingga mustahil bagiku untuk bergerak. Akhirnya salah satu dari mereka menendang betisku. Aku tersungkur. Sekali lagi si perokok itu memegang bahu dari belakang dan memaksaku berlutut", "Tuhan, kita semakin dekat. Kau terasa semakin ingin menaungiku". It reflects the broader theme of state-sponsored brutality, highlighting the lack of accountability and the systemic abuse of power under authoritarian rule. Such scenes serve as a grim reminder of the suffering that individuals faced for speaking out against injustice. Amidst the physical pain and impending death, the character reflects on their spiritual connection with God. This statement shows how, in moments of extreme suffering, faith becomes a source of comfort and strength. The quote also hints at the psychological toll of such violence, where the victim clings to hope and spirituality as a way to endure the unbearable.

"Pada debur ombak yang kesembilan, terdengar ledakan itu. Tiba-tiba saja aku merasa ada sesuatu yang tajam menembus punggungku. Pedih, perih. Lalu, belakang kepalaku. Seketika aku masih merasakan sebatang kaki bersepatu gerigi yang menendang punggungku. Tubuhku ditarik begitu lekas oleh arus dan bola besi yang terikat pada pergelangan kakiku. Aku melayang-layang ke dasar lautan." This scene graphically portrays the violent death of activists, reflecting the extreme measures taken by the regime to eliminate dissent. The use of weighted restraints and the act of discarding bodies into the sea illustrate the systematic nature of enforced disappearances

during this era. It exposes the horrifying reality of how victims were not only tortured but erased, leaving families and society in anguish. The ocean becomes a symbol of both loss and secrecy, as many of these crimes were hidden from public knowledge.

“Kini mereka mengikat tanganku dengan besi pemberat. Tangan kiri. Lalu tangan kanan. Sese kali aku menggeliat, ber-usaha mencari celah dan kemungkinan meski akan berakhir sia-sia. Aku enggan memberikan tangan dan sengaja mengeraskan kepalku. Salah satu dari mereka menabok mukaku.” It highlights the psychological strength of activists who, despite the overwhelming power of the regime, retained their dignity and humanity. This resistance symbolizes the broader fight for justice and freedom, even in the darkest moments.

3) Family and Social Impact

Table 3. Analysis of Family and Social Impact

Social Critiques	Quotation from the Novel	Sociological Analysis
Family and Social Impact	<i>“Kamu tak akan tahu beratnya kehilangan anak.”</i>	
	<i>“Aku juga kehilangan abangku, Bu. Mas Laut adalah kakak yang sangat dekat denganku.” “Iya makanya, biarkan mereka mencari Mas Laut, sementara Ibu dan Bapak menanti di rumah dan menyediakan masakan Kesukaannya dan membersinkan kamarnya.” “kami berbincang dengan orangtua Julius di Yogya yang menumpuk berkardus-kardus mi instan karena mereka tahu Julius sangat menyukai makanan tidak bergizi itu, atau Bu Arum Ibunda Sunu yang malah memberikan kami beberapa lembar sarung batik dan jaket Sunu karena takut Sunu kedinginan”</i>	Explores the emotional toll on families of the disappeared. It reflects how political oppression impacts not only activists but also their loved ones, showcasing shared grief.

“Kamu tak akan tahu beratnya kehilangan anak.”, *“Aku juga kehilangan abangku, Bu. Mas Laut adalah kakak yang sangat dekat denganku.”* These lines capture the deep emotional pain experienced by families of the disappeared. For parents, the loss of a child is an unbearable void, while for siblings, it signifies the loss of a confidant and a lifelong bond. The dialogue highlights how political oppression not only targets activists but also deeply scars their families, the shared pain between different family members illustrates the widespread impact of enforced disappearances and the collective trauma that lingers for years.

“Iya makanya, biarkan mereka mencari Mas Laut, sementara Ibu dan Bapak menanti di rumah dan menyediakan masakan Kesukaannya dan membersinkan kamarnya.” This quote reflects how families cope with the uncertainty of not knowing the fate of their loved ones. The act of preparing meals and maintaining the activist’s room shows a form of hope an attempt to keep the missing person’s memory alive and a belief that they might one day return. It illustrates how grief intertwines with hope, as families cling to routines and memories to deal with the absence.

“kami berbincang dengan orangtua Julius di Yogya yang menumpuk berkardus-kardus mi instan karena mereka tahu Julius sangat menyukai makanan tidak bergizi itu, atau Bu Arum Ibunda Sunu yang malah memberikan kami beberapa lembar sarung batik dan jaket Sunu karena takut Sunu kedinginan” the act of collecting items that the missing person loved, such as instant noodles or warm clothing, represents their enduring care and love. It also showcases the solidarity among families of the disappeared, who come together to share stories, memories, and emotional support. These moments reveal how grief creates a sense of community, with families finding solace in each other while seeking justice and answers.

CONCLUSIONS

A novel of *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S. Chudori intricately weaves together the themes of freedom of speech, human rights abuses, and the emotional toll on families to provide a poignant narrative of Indonesia's Reformation era. The novel captures the courage and determination of activists like Biru Laut, who risk everything to fight for democracy and the right to speak freely under an authoritarian regime. Through Biru Laut and his fellow activists, Leila brings to life the sacrifices of those who refused to remain silent in the face of systemic repression, exposing the violence and silencing mechanisms used by the government to suppress dissent. The graphic depictions of torture, enforced disappearances, and psychological abuse reveal the devastating cost of resistance, serving as a powerful indictment of authoritarian brutality.

However, the novel extends beyond the individual struggles of activists, delving deeply into the profound impact on their families. Parents, siblings, and loved ones are left behind to grapple with unbearable grief and uncertainty, often clinging to routines, memories, and fragile hope as they search for answers about the fate of their missing relatives. Families of the disappeared form a community bound by shared loss and collective resilience, their experiences underscoring the broader social consequences of political violence. Leila illustrates how oppression ripples through entire communities, showing that the fight for freedom is never isolated but deeply communal.

The phrase "the fragility of freedom" in *Laut Bercerita* underscores the reality that democracy, human rights, and personal freedoms are never guaranteed or permanent; they can easily be threatened or taken away by authoritarian regimes. The novel illustrates this through the lives of student activists who fight for reform, only to be met with brutal repression, torture, and enforced disappearances. Despite Indonesia being officially *Merdeka* (independent), the story reveals how oppression, censorship, and political violence persist, showing that freedom exists only as long as those in power allow it. The government's ability to control narratives, silence dissent, and manipulate history further reinforces how fragile democratic ideals can be when not actively defended. In this way, *Laut Bercerita* serves as both a historical record and a cautionary tale, reminding future generations of their responsibility to safeguard freedom and resist authoritarianism.

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