



Representation of Power in Leila S. Chudori's Novel *Laut Bercerita*: A Semiological Approach by Roland Barthes

Muhammad Dzulfikar Putra Effendi¹, Fafi Inayatillah²

¹²Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia

*E-mail: muhammaddzulfikar.22163@mhs.unesa.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This research is motivated by the fact that Leila S. Chudori's novel *Laut Bercerita* represents the history of the repressive power of the New Order through complex symbolic signs, requiring semiological theory to reveal the ideological meaning behind the text. This study aims to describe: (1) the denotative meaning of power, (2) the connotative meaning of power, (3) the mythical meaning of power, and (4) the representation of power in the novel. The method used is descriptive-qualitative with Roland Barthes' semiological approach. The primary data source is the text of the novel *Laut Bercerita*. Data collection was done through close reading, while data analysis followed Barthes' three stages of signification: identification of signs, analysis of denotation and connotation, and revelation of myth, which were then synthesized into a representation of power. The results indicate that power is represented through six main forms: (1) repression and surveillance, (2) systematic violence, (3) narrative control and propaganda, (4) psychological terror, (5) structures that monopolize the state, and (6) entities leaving permanent trauma. At the myth level, the novel dismantles the New Order's grand narrative of stability and development by showing that power is built on systematic oppression and enforced disappearances. This study concludes that power in the novel is constructed through a sign system with literal denotative meanings and ideologically laden connotative meanings, forming myths of totalitarian power and counter-myths of resistance.

Keywords: representation, power, novel, semiological approach

Representasi Kekuasaan dalam Novel *Laut Bercerita* Karya Leila S. Chudori: Pendekatan Semiologi Roland Barthes

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh fakta bahwa novel *Laut Bercerita* karya Leila S. Chudori merepresentasikan sejarah kekuasaan represif Orde Baru melalui tanda-tanda simbolik yang kompleks, sehingga memerlukan teori semiologi untuk mengungkap makna ideologis di balik teks. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan: (1) makna denotasi kekuasaan, (2) makna konotasi kekuasaan, (3) makna mitos kekuasaan, serta (4) representasi kekuasaan dalam novel. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan semiologi Roland Barthes. Sumber data primer adalah teks novel *Laut Bercerita*. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui *close reading*, sedangkan teknik analisis data mengikuti tiga tahap signifikasi Barthes: identifikasi tanda, analisis denotasi dan konotasi, serta pengungkapan mitos, yang kemudian disintesis menjadi representasi kekuasaan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kekuasaan direpresentasikan melalui enam bentuk utama: (1) represi dan pengawasan, (2) kekerasan sistematis, (3) kontrol narasi dan propaganda, (4) teror psikologis, (5) struktur monopoli negara, serta (6) entitas yang meninggalkan trauma permanen. Pada tataran mitos, novel membongkar narasi besar Orde Baru tentang stabilitas dan pembangunan dengan memperlihatkan bahwa kekuasaan dibangun di atas penindasan sistematis serta penghilangan paksa. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kekuasaan dalam novel dibangun melalui sistem tanda yang memiliki makna denotatif literal dan makna konotatif sarat ideologi, yang membentuk mitos kekuasaan totaliter sekaligus *counter-myths* perlawanan.

Kata kunci: representasi, kekuasaan, semiologi, novel

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INTRODUCTION

The development of contemporary Indonesian literature demonstrates that literary works function not only as entertainment but also as a medium for social criticism and resistance to dominant discourse (Budianta, 2018; Elmustian & Jalil, 2015). Literature provides a space for authors to reveal socio-political experiences marginalized within official state narratives. In this context, representations of history, violence, and political trauma have become dominant themes in contemporary works (Budianta, 2019). Power in literature is not only present through explicit repressive actions but also operates through subtle mechanisms such as language, spatial construction, and narrative structure. According to Budiman (2020), power in literary texts is a fluid and dynamic network of relations, often instilled through narrative control and the internalization of ideology.

To dissect the complexity of these signs of power, semiological theory is necessary (Barthes, 1957, 1964). Barthes divides the system of signification into two levels: denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (ideological meaning), which at a higher level constitutes myth. This idea is reinforced by Hoed (2017), who states that Indonesian literary signs often contain connotative meanings influenced by the nation's historical trauma, such as state violence and collective memory. The novel *Laut Bercerita* (Chudori, 2017) was chosen as the research object because it chronicles the dark history of the forced disappearance of activists during the New Order era and uses powerful symbols such as the sea, prison, darkness, and tortured bodies as signs of repressive state power.

Based on this background, this research was formulated to answer the following questions:

- 1) What is the denotative meaning of power in *Laut Bercerita*?
- 2) What is the connotative meaning of power in the novel?

- 3) What is the meaning of the myth of power in the novel?

- 4) How is power represented in the novel?

The purpose of this research is to describe these four aspects of meaning and representation. Theoretically, this research benefits from enriching the application of Barthes's semiology in Indonesian literary studies. Practically, it is hoped that it will serve as a reference for researchers, academics, and readers in appreciating the political dimensions of literary works.

In more detail, this research is expected to provide the following benefits: theoretically, this research expands the treasury of Roland Barthes' semiological studies by systematically operating the three stages of signification (denotation, connotation, myth) on contemporary Indonesian literary objects, thus offering a replicable analytical model to unravel the ideology behind other literary texts and enrich the theory of representation and power in sign-based literary criticism; practically, for future researchers, the results of this research serve as a starting point for exploring other approaches such as trauma studies or critical discourse analysis; for academics and educators, this research can be used as alternative teaching materials in literary criticism and semiotics courses to train critical-ideological reading; for general readers, this research serves as a guide to appreciate the hidden layers of meaning in the novel, not only enjoying the story but also understanding the author's socio-political criticism; and for the wider public, this research helps maintain the politics of memory about the events of enforced disappearances during the New Order era, in line with the function of literature as an alternative archive of historical truth. This study uses the theory of representation (Hall, 1997) as a process of producing meaning through signs, the theory of power (Foucault, 1977; Budiman, 2020) as a network of relations that works through the control of discourse and the body, and Roland Barthes's (1957, 1964) semiological theory which emphasizes the analysis of denotation, connotation,



and myth. This research is relevant to the studies of Ariyati (2019) on the representation of power in film, Fitriyadi (2025) on ideological symbols in music videos, and Balkis & Mardhiah (2025) and Rahmi (2021) who examine power and violence in *Laut Bercerita*. However, no research has comprehensively used Barthes's three-stage semiological framework (denotation, connotation, myth) to analyze the representation of power in this novel holistically.

METHOD

This research is qualitative with a descriptive-analytical-interpretative type, suitable for the object of study, namely literary texts requiring in-depth interpretation of meaning behind signs (Moleong, 2017; Sugiyono, 2019; Razak, 2017). The approach used is Roland Barthes' semiology (1964), which systematically analyzes layers of meaning from denotation to myth.

The primary data source is the text of the novel *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S. Chudori (Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2017, 379 pages). The data consist of textual units (words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs) containing indications of power signs such as symbols (sea, prison, darkness), repressive actions, spatial descriptions, or ideologically charged dialogues. Data collection was carried out through close reading with the following criteria: 1) containing linguistic or narrative elements related to power, repression, or resistance; 2) having potential for analysis at denotative and connotative levels; 3) supporting the objective of describing the representation of power. Collected data were then coded for classification.

Data analysis followed Barthes' semiological model systematically: 1) identification of power signs; 2) denotation analysis (literal meaning); 3) connotation analysis (cultural, historical, ideological meaning); 4) myth analysis (revealing naturalized ideology); and 5) synthesis of power

representation. Data validity was ensured through theoretical triangulation (comparison with previous research findings) and an audit trail (systematic documentation of all analysis stages).

RESULT

Based on the analysis of 16 data units from the novel *Laut Bercerita* (Chudori, 2017), the following findings were obtained.

1. Denotative Meaning of Power

At the denotative level, power is represented through literal signs that refer to the physical apparatus of the New Order regime. These signs include: hidden spaces for discussion (Data 1), electric shock devices (Data 4, 6, 8), the term "flies" for intelligence agents (Data 1, 4), prisons and interrogation rooms (Data 13), and large "drums" dumped into the sea (Data 15). Literally, "haunted house" means an isolated empty building, "electrocuted" refers to electric shock on the body, and "drum" refers to a large metal container. At this level, signs only depict the physical reality of arrests, torture, and abduction of political prisoners.

2. Connotative Meaning of Power

At the connotative level, these literal signs develop into ideological meanings. "Flies" connote a pervasive state surveillance system that penetrates private spaces. "Electrocution" not only physically hurts but becomes a symbol of dehumanization and loss of bodily autonomy (Data 8: "my body convulsed on its own without the command of my brain's nerves"). "Drums dumped into the sea" (Data 15) connote enforced disappearance and the systematic effort to erase evidence of crimes. The "haunted house" (Data 1) transforms into a space for intellectual resistance under threat. Stigmatizing language in the media, such as "PKI" (Indonesian Communist Party), "worms", "kingpin", "mastermind" (Data 10), connotes narrative control to criminalize activists. Total

uncertainty about location and fate (Data 14) is a psychological weapon more destructive than physical violence.

3. Mythical Meaning of Power

At the myth level, the novel dismantles the grand narratives constructed by New Order power. The myth of “stability and development” is reversed by showing that stability was built on oppression, systematic violence, and terror. The myth that “activists disappeared just like that” is dismantled by revealing that they were murdered and dumped into the sea in drums (Data 15). The myth of “the state as guardian of order” is criticized by showing that the state itself was the agent of violence (Data 4, 6). The novel also constructs counter-myths: that resistance, however small (as “mosquitoes” or “pebbles”), has moral legitimacy (Data 9); and that the trauma of victims and their families cannot be simply forgotten, countering the state’s myth of normalization and erasure of memory (Data 16).

4. Representation of Power

Synthetically, power in *Laut Bercerita* is represented in six interrelated forms: (1) repression and surveillance of freedom of thought; (2) systematic, organized, and sustained violence; (3) narrative and propaganda control through media and ideological stigma; (4) psychological terror through uncertainty and the creation of mutual suspicion; (5) an authoritarian, corrupt, and patrimonial state monopoly structure; and (6) an entity that leaves intergenerational trauma on victims’ families through ambiguous loss.

DISCUSSION

The first finding regarding denotative meaning shows that Leila S. Chudori builds a realism of violence literally, creating a concrete material foundation for political criticism. This aligns with Sambodja’s (2021) argument that denotative reading serves as an objective foundation before

deeper interpretation. Without clear literal meaning, criticism of power could lose its impact. At the connotative level, the findings reinforce Hoed’s (2017) assertion that signs in Indonesian literature are strongly influenced by the nation’s historical trauma. The connotation of “sea” as a mass grave, “electrocution” as dehumanization, and “PKI” as a deadly stigma show how the novel uses cultural-historical meanings to build ideological significance. This finding also aligns with Rahmi’s (2021) analysis of violence as a symbol of structural repression, and Balkis & Mardhiah’s (2025) study on the control of knowledge by power. The novel effectively uses connotation to “speak the unspeakable” under a repressive regime.

The finding on myth is the most significant contribution of this research, distinguishing it from previous studies. Using Barthes’ (1957) framework, *Laut Bercerita* not only reveals violence but actively dismantles the process of naturalization of New Order ideology. The myths of “stability” and “development” are exposed as covers for oppression and corruption. This finding aligns with Paramaditha’s (2021) critique that contemporary literature functions as a counter-discourse against official state narratives. The novel rejects the myth that “no gross human rights violations occurred” by vividly depicting the process of murder and evidence disposal.

The limitation of this research is its single focus on the novel’s text, without analyzing reader reception or the broader sociological context of production. The strength of this research lies in the use of Barthes’ complete framework (denotation-connotation-myth), enabling a more comprehensive revelation of power ideology compared to previous studies that tended to focus on only one or two levels. The implication is that this research affirms literature’s function as an “alternative archive” of historical truth in the face of state efforts to erase collective memory (Budianta, 2019).



CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the representation of power in the novel *Laut Bercerita* through Roland Barthes' semiological approach, it is concluded that power is systematically represented through three levels of signification. At the denotative level, literal signs such as electric shock devices, interrogation rooms, the term "flies", and "drums" are found. At the connotative level, these signs develop into ideological meanings: state surveillance, dehumanization, enforced disappearance, narrative control, and psychological terror. At the myth level, the novel dismantles the New Order's grand narrative of stability and development, and constructs counter-myths about the legitimacy of resistance and the memory of trauma. Overall, power is represented in six forms: repression and surveillance, systematic violence, narrative control, psychological terror, state monopoly, and permanent trauma. This research affirms that literature can serve as an effective medium for social criticism and the politics of memory.

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