



Inequality in Access to Education in the Novel *Dia Adalah Kakakku* by Tere Liye: A Sociological of Literature Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe and analyze forms of inequality in educational access experienced by characters and to reveal the author's social criticism of public education reflected in Tere Liye's novel *Dia Adalah Kakakku* through a sociology of literature approach. Data collection was conducted online via the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia and Regional Libraries over a three-month period from February to April 2026. This qualitative descriptive research based on library research applies Alan Swingewood's sociology of literature approach to analyze the novel as a socio-cultural document. The object of this study focuses on the novel text *Dia Adalah Kakakku* by Tere Liye (Republika Publishing, 2018, 398 pages), with textual sample respondents consisting of utterances, dialogues, background descriptions, and actions of the main character Laisa and her siblings. The primary instrument was the researcher, assisted by a document analysis guide and data corpus tables. Data analysis techniques applied qualitative content analysis integrated with the Miles and Huberman model, encompassing data reduction, descriptive-dialectical presentation, and conclusion drawing through textual read-and-note techniques. The results indicate three main findings: (1) the geographical isolation of Lahambay Valley and structural poverty trigger limitations in school facilities and force the sacrifice of Laisa's educational rights; (2) Tere Liye's authorship position acts as a social witness articulating the worldview of rural communities; and (3) the novel serves as social criticism exposing hidden costs (operational, housing, and uniform expenses) in the educational system.

Keywords: inequality, acces to education, novel, sociological of literatute

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental human right and a key indicator for measuring a nation's level of well-being and progress. Ideally, every citizen possesses equal rights and opportunities to access quality education, unhindered by social status, economic constraints, or geographic isolation. However, social realities in Indonesia reveal stark inequalities in the distribution of educational facilities and quality. This phenomenon of unequal access to education constitutes a systemic issue that frequently entraps communities in remote and isolated areas. Limited basic infrastructure, a lack

of transportation, and high educational costs often widen the gap between high-income groups and the lower class living below the poverty line.

The structural poverty experienced by marginalized communities compels them to make distressing yet rational choices for the sake of survival. Education—which ought to serve as a vehicle for upward social mobility—has instead become an inaccessible luxury. Consequently, children from impoverished families in remote regions often sacrifice their right to education to support their family's economic needs. This phenomenon of limited and marginalized access to education

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occurs not only in the empirical reality of society but is also captured artfully and aesthetically in literature, reflecting sociocultural dynamics.

As a medium for thought and social reflection, literature is capable of sharply portraying the various forms of injustice and inequality present in society. One Indonesian literary work that deeply captures this phenomenon is the novel *Dia Adalah Kakakku* by Tere Liye. Set against the backdrop of the isolated Lahambay Valley, the novel depicts the struggles of a poor family facing limited access to education and the burden of its costs. The protagonist, Laisa, consciously makes a pragmatic choice to sacrifice her own education so that her younger siblings can continue their schooling through to the university level. The interplay between geographical isolation, poverty, and the struggle for education in this novel warrants scholarly examination to uncover the underlying social constructs. Consequently, inequality in access to education serves as the primary subject of analysis, explored through the novel *Dia Adalah Kakakku* by Tere Liye.

Based on this background, this study aims to describe and analyze the forms of inequality in access to education experienced by the characters, as well as to reveal the author's social critique regarding the societal educational order—as reflected in the novel *Dia Adalah Kakakku* by Tere Liye—using a sociology of literature approach.

This research is expected to yield both theoretical and practical benefits through the perspective of the sociology of literature. Theoretically, it contributes to the body of literary knowledge, particularly by enriching critical studies on how literary works serve as socio-cultural documents that capture the reality of unequal access to education. Practically, from the perspective of policymakers and educators, this study provides a socio-historical overview of the tangible barriers faced by the lower class in accessing education; this insight can inform the formulation of educational assistance policies that are more inclusive and spatially equitable.

The study of educational inequality variables in this research is grounded in the theoretical framework of the sociology of literature. Swingwood (1972:13) posits that literature acts as a reflection of society, capturing the social structures, class disparities, and societal conditions prevalent at the time of the work's creation. Literature does not exist in a cultural vacuum but rather absorbs the social dynamics unfolding around it. Furthermore, Swingwood (1972:17) asserts that literature functions as a tool for social criticism, enabling authors to challenge unequal and unjust social orders. Aligning with this view, Damaianti (2018:42) and Juriati & Muhamad (2022:15) emphasize that the sociology of literature serves as an analytical lens for documenting facts regarding structural social inequality within works of fiction. In the context of education, Ratna (2013:88) explains that education often serves as an arena for cultural reproduction, where economic and social capital play a decisive role in an individual's success in accessing higher levels of education.

Previous research on the sociology of literature and educational issues in novels has been conducted by several scholars and published in online academic journals. A study by Nurgiyantoro (2019) reveals that popular literary works in Indonesia frequently articulate educational values and offer social critiques regarding the marginalization of the lower class. Furthermore, research by Faruk (2020) demonstrates that the representation of poverty in modern Indonesian novels functions not merely as a narrative setting but as a form of symbolic resistance by the author against existing social structural inequalities. Additionally, a study by Wijaya and Setiawan (2021) confirms the effectiveness of applying Swingwood's sociology of literature theory to uncover forms of social critique—specifically regarding unequal access to public facilities, including education for communities in underdeveloped regions—within fictional texts. Unlike these relevant studies, the present research focuses specifically on analyzing the variable of



unequal access to education as reflected in the novel *Dia Adalah Kakakku* by Liye.

METHOD

This descriptive-qualitative study, based on library research, applies Swingwood's sociology of literature approach to examine the novel as a socio-cultural document that reflects and critiques the issue of unequal access to education in remote areas. Conducted in four stages—preparation, data collection, dialectical analysis, and report writing—data collection was carried out online (utilizing the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia and regional libraries) over a three-month period (February–April 2026). With the researcher serving as the primary instrument—supported by a document analysis guide and a data corpus table—primary data consisting of narratives, setting descriptions, actions, and dialogue (specifically involving the character Laisa and her younger siblings) were extracted from the novel **Dia Adalah Kakakku** by Liye (Republika Penerbit, 2018, 398 pages). This work reflects educational inequality, geographical isolation, and structural poverty. Secondary data were sourced from books on the sociology of literature, reputable scholarly journals, Statistics Indonesia (BPS) data, and policy documents regarding education in isolated regions.

Data collection involved textual observation using "read-and-note" techniques to categorize excerpts into Swingwood's three sociological dimensions: literature as a reflection of society, the context of authorship and production, and literature as a tool for social criticism. Data analysis employed qualitative content analysis integrated with the Miles and Huberman model, comprising data reduction (based on indicators of geographical isolation, economic poverty, and hidden costs), descriptive-dialectical presentation (linking fictional and empirical facts), and conclusion drawing. Eschewing descriptive statistics (mean, mode, median) and parametric or non-parametric inferential statistics (such as t-tests, correlation, Wilcoxon tests, or SPSS-based normality tests),

the analysis focused on in-depth textual interpretation, while data validity was ensured through theoretical triangulation and the triangulation of secondary data sources.

RESULTS

Based on Alan Swingwood's sociological analysis of literature applied to Tere Liye's novel **Dia Adalah Kakakku**, three key findings emerged that consistently illustrate the variables of unequal access to education in isolated regions. The numbering and presentation of these research findings are outlined below.

1. Geographical Isolation and Structural Poverty as Barriers to Educational Access

The first finding indicates that unequal access to education in the novel is driven by the interplay between the remoteness of the Lahambay Valley and the economic poverty entrapping the lower class. This aligns with the "literature as a reflection of society" dimension (Swingwood, 1972:13), which views the text as a mirror of the social order. The lack of adequate infrastructure and school facilities tangibly restricts children's fundamental right to education. The deplorable physical condition of the school is reflected in the narrative: There was only one teacher for all the classes. Classes? That was a polite term for a dilapidated building with a rusty zinc roof, woven bamboo walls, and a cracked cement floor (Liye, 2018:45–46).

The empirical reality of rudimentary school facilities in this isolated area is mirrored in data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology's Center for Data and Information (2024:12), which highlights the high percentage of damaged educational facilities in 3T regions (frontier, outermost, and underdeveloped areas). Beyond physical facilities, regional isolation is compounded by limited transportation access to centers of higher-level education:

The only access from the District Town to the valley was a three-meter-wide rocky road... secondary school in the District Town, which

meant even more money would be required (Liye, 2018).

As emphasized by Mahamod (2014:48) and the Central Statistics Agency (2023:28), spatial barriers and regional isolation consistently drive up mobility costs, thereby exacerbating disparities in educational access for remote communities. Economic pressures on the family ultimately compelled the character Laisa to make the pragmatic decision to sacrifice her own education:

It was actually Laisa who decided to step aside and forgo school so that her younger siblings could attend... Let Laisa be the one to quit school (Liye, 2018).

Laisa buried her own aspirations in order to become the family's economic pillar:

She had buried those dreams deep within. Besides, if she went to school, who would help Mother earn money for her younger siblings? (Liye, 2018:182–183).

This phenomenon—the curtailing of a family member's right to education for the sake of capital accumulation—confirms the views of Ratna (2013:88) and Wijaya & Setiawan (2021:28) regarding the limited economic capital of poor families, which necessitates compromise-driven decisions within the domestic structure.

2. The Author's Position as a Social Witness and Articulator for Marginalized Groups

The second finding reveals that the narrative of educational inequality in the novel reflects Tere Liye's sociocultural background as an author capable of capturing the realities of remote communities. Swingwood & Laurenson (1972:17) state that an author acts as a witness to their times, voicing the social conditions of their group. The author presents the worldview of marginalized communities, who regard education as the sole means of upward mobility to escape the trap of poverty: School! School is far more important than working. You'll amount to nothing if you're

ignorant like Mother! Do you think a hard life is fun? (Liye, 2018:77). This idea aligns with the findings of Damaianti (2018:42) and Juriati & Muhamad (2022:15) regarding the role of the sociology of literature in capturing the societal belief that education is the primary means of improving social status. The author also portrays the psychological dilemma faced by a child from an impoverished family—such as Dalimunte—who feels guilty because his education places a burden on his family:

Dali did not want to go to school. Dali did not want to make Kak Lais sad. He did not want to see Mamak working hard, scorched by the sun... (Liye, 2018:200).

As discussed by Faruk (2020:118) and Nurgiyantoro (2019:48), socially themed novels intensely articulate the mental stress and emotional burden experienced by marginalized children caught between academic aspirations and guilt over their parents' financial situation.

3. A Challenge to Hidden Costs and Inequitable Educational Distribution as Social Criticism

The third finding identifies that the novel *Dia Adalah Kakakku* reflects a challenge to the educational system and policies in Indonesia, consistent with the concept of literature as social criticism (Swingwood, 1972:22). The text exposes the existence of "hidden costs"—ranging from uniforms and housing to transportation expenses—that remain unaffordable for poor families:

What could be done? There wasn't even money to pay the initial enrollment fee, let alone the cost of Dalimunte traveling back and forth to the district town (Liye, 2018:201).

These findings align with analyses by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2022:35) and Setiawan (2021:5), which indicate that despite the rollout of free education schemes, the burden of "hidden costs" remains an invisible barrier excluding the poor in isolated areas. This narrative demonstrates that the continuation of schooling for children in isolated regions often comes at the cost of extreme toil and delayed education:



If Mom doesn't have the money this year, then Mom will have it next year... By next year at the latest, you must go back to school (Liye, 2018:201).

Amidst rudimentary school facilities:

Dalimunte was known as the smartest child, even though the school was truly bare-bones (Liye, 2018:84), members of the lower class are still required to work exceptionally hard to attain the promise of a better life (Liye, 2018:151). This social critique reinforces Razak's (1989:22) argument that literary works serve as instruments for an author's political articulation, challenging the promise of educational meritocracy—a promise that frequently fails to reach the lowest strata of society.

DISCUSSION

Geographical Isolation and Structural Poverty as Barriers to Educational Access

The discussion regarding the first finding—concerning the geographical isolation of the Lahambay Valley and economic poverty—aligns with Swingwood's (1972:13) first dimension: literature as a reflection of society. Literary works reflect a social order in which class structures and geographical conditions constrain individual social mobility. As outlined in the Results section, the lack of physical infrastructure is clearly reflected in the description of the school's meager facilities: There was only one teacher for all the classes. Classes? That was a polite term for a dilapidated building with a rusty corrugated iron roof, woven bamboo walls, and a cracked cement floor (Liye, 2018:45–46).

This fictional scenario is mirrored in real-world data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology's Center for Data and Information (2024:12), which highlights the high percentage of damaged educational facilities in 3T regions (frontier, outermost, and underdeveloped areas). These limitations are further exacerbated by transportation hurdles

involved in reaching secondary schools located in the district town (Liye, 2018). From a sociological perspective, Laisa's sacrifice in dropping out of school (Liye, 2018) to fund her younger siblings' education exemplifies Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and economic capital (as cited in Ratna, 2013:92), wherein families lacking sufficient economic capital are compelled to curtail their members' right to education. This is underscored by Mamak's words:

Mamak goes to the fields every day! Every afternoon, she heads to the forest to gather damar resin! Saving every single penny so that you all can go to school! (Liye, 2018:68).

These findings align with the study by Mahamod (2014:48) and the report by Statistics Indonesia (2023:28), both of which confirm that geographical isolation and structural poverty consistently restrict educational accessibility for remote communities. Furthermore, this discussion reinforces the findings of Wijaya and Setiawan (2021:28) regarding spatial barriers in underdeveloped regions that aggravate the intergenerational reproduction of poverty.

The Author's Position as a Social Witness and Articulator for Marginalized Groups

Discussion of the second finding confirms the second dimension identified by Swingwood (1972:19) and Swingwood & Laurenson (1972:17) regarding the social situation and the position of authorship. Authors are integral parts of society who bring ideologies and social sensibilities into their texts. As emphasized by Faruk (2020:118), authors in modern Indonesian literature often act as social witnesses, voicing inequalities that escape the attention of the mainstream public. The author articulates the worldview of marginalized communities—a perspective that positions schooling as the primary vehicle for vertical mobility (a "social elevator")—as underscored by Mamak:

School! School is far more important than working. You'll amount to nothing if you're ignorant like Mamak! Do you think a hard life is fun? (Liye, 2018:77).

However, the author also portrays the psychological dilemma faced by children from impoverished families—such as Dalimunte—who feel guilty because their education places a burden on their families:

Dali didn't want to go to school. Dali didn't want to make Kak Lais sad. Didn't want to see Mamak working hard, baking under the sun... (Liye, 2018:200).

In contrast to the findings of Nurgiyantoro (2019:48), which emphasize general educational moral values, the discussion in this study specifically demonstrates that the authenticity of Tere Liye's narrative stems from his capacity to articulate the mental realities and emotional burdens of marginalized communities that are geoculturally alienated (Damaianti, 2018:42; Juriati & Muhamad, 2022:15).

Challenging Hidden Costs and Inequitable Educational Distribution as Social Criticism

Discussion of the third finding is highly relevant to the third dimension identified by Swingwood (1972:22): literature as a tool for social criticism. Literature does not merely record reality; it also protests against inequitable social orders. As noted by Razak (1989:22) and Setiawan (2021:5), social criticism in modern Indonesian novels serves as a vehicle for authors to articulate political views and document disparities in public facilities within isolated regions. The novel critically exposes the existence of "hidden costs"—such as initial enrollment fees, uniforms, and transportation expenses—that continue to burden the lower socioeconomic class:

"What is to be done? There isn't even money for the enrollment fee, let alone the cost of Dalimunte traveling back and forth to the district town" (Liye, 2018:201).

This situation leads to children in remote areas delaying their schooling, as they are forced to rely on grueling manual labor (Liye, 2018:151, 201). This fictional scenario is mirrored in data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2022:35) and the Ministry's Data and Information Center (2024:12). In this context, the text challenges the illusion of educational meritocracy, which overlooks the unequal starting points faced by urban versus remote-area children. These findings extend the research of Wijaya & Setiawan (2021:32) by affirming that social criticism in literature can expose systemic flaws in public policies—policies that appear fair on the surface yet prove discriminatory in practice due to the burden of hidden costs.

Research Strengths and Limitations

This study possesses several key strengths regarding its methodology and analytical depth. First, its strength lies in the acuity of its dialectical analysis, which successfully integrates Swingwood's three dimensions of the sociology of literature with specific textual evidence regarding educational inequality within the novel. Second, the study excels in the depth of the variables examined; it goes beyond merely dissecting economic factors to elaborate on variables such as spatial or geographical isolation, limited school facilities, and the "hidden costs" within the education system. Third, regarding methodology, the use of a qualitative-dialectical approach based on document analysis proved capable of comprehensively uncovering the layers of social criticism embedded in the literary text. Conversely, the study has limitations that must be openly acknowledged. Its primary weaknesses lie in the limited sample size and the scope of empirical variables. Because the study focuses on a single literary work (single-text analysis), the generalizability of the findings regarding the broader picture of educational inequality in Indonesian literature is constrained. Furthermore, in terms of empirical analytical depth, the study



did not incorporate direct field research or interviews with readers or the author to examine how the critical discourse is perceived at the societal level.

CONCLUSION

First, the novel reflects social realities concerning geographical isolation and structural poverty, which combine to obstruct children's access to education in remote areas. The lack of basic facilities and high transportation costs force lower-class families to curtail their educational rights; this is exemplified by Laisa's sacrifice of her own aspirations in order to fund her younger siblings' schooling.

Second, Tere Liye's role as an author serves to bear social witness and give voice to marginalized groups. The author successfully captures the worldview of rural communities—where education is viewed as the primary vehicle for upward social mobility—while also portraying the psychological dilemmas and emotional burdens faced by impoverished children who feel guilty about the sacrifices made by their families.

Third, the novel acts as a vehicle for social critique regarding Indonesia's education system by exposing the illusion of meritocracy and the reality of "hidden costs"—such as uniforms, enrollment fees, and operational expenses—that widen the gap between the underprivileged and the affluent. Ultimately, this literary work demonstrates that it is not merely a source of entertainment but a socio-cultural document that realistically portrays, and challenges, the unequal distribution of educational opportunities.

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