



Social Inequality in Contemporary Indonesian Novels: A Bourdieusian Perspective

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Keywords:	ABSTRACT
social inequality; sociology of literature; Pierre Bourdieu; habitus; capital; contemporary Indonesian novel	Social inequality in contemporary Indonesian novels appears in various forms, including gender, political, social-class, and educational inequality. This study examines five contemporary Indonesian novels Saman (Ayu Utami, 1998), Pulang (Leila S. Chudori, 2012), Lelaki Harimau (Eka Kurniawan, 2004), Cantik Itu Luka (Eka Kurniawan, 2002), and Orang-Orang Biasa (Andrea Hirata, 2019) through Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field. The study aims to identify and compare the forms of social inequality represented in the five novels and explain how habitus, capital, and field shape the reproduction of inequality within each narrative. Using a qualitative descriptive multiple-case study design, all five novels were treated as primary data and analysed through directed content analysis and systematic thematic coding. The analysis identified four major forms of inequality. Political inequality was the most dominant theme (40%), while gender, social-class, and educational inequality each accounted for 20%. The findings indicate that these forms of inequality are closely interconnected. Saman connects political repression with control over women's bodies; Pulang demonstrates how cultural capital may lose its value within the domestic political field; Lelaki Harimau portrays tensions between village habitus and elite social capital; Cantik Itu Luka links colonial trauma with intergenerational class stratification; and Orang-Orang Biasa highlights unequal access to education and the persistence of poverty. Overall, the findings show that contemporary Indonesian fiction represents inequality as interconnected forms of capital, consistent with Bourdieu's framework. The study's novelty lies in applying a consistently operationalised Bourdieusian framework across five novels, providing a replicable model for teaching and conducting sociological literary analysis.

INTRODUCTION

If you go back and reread post-reform Indonesian fiction, there's a kind of unofficial record in there of who benefited from all the change and who got left behind. Political space has certainly opened up since 1998, but that opening never quite closed the gap between people who have voice, money, education, and social standing, and people who don't (Harvey, 2005). It's exactly in that gap that novels like *Saman*, *Pulang*, *Lelaki Harimau*, *Cantik Itu Luka*, and *Orang-Orang Biasa* find their material. Not as a flat social report, but as stories that show what inequality feels like from the inside, through characters who are trying to survive it, push back against it, or just make sense of where they stand (Damono, 1979; Escarpit, 2005).

This concern is not merely a national one. Comparative work in literary sociology has shown that the contemporary novel, across different national traditions, increasingly registers widening social inequality as a central preoccupation (Aktari-Sevgi, 2022; Singer, 2011a) while the broader structural forces behind that inequality market liberalisation and the uneven

distribution of wealth and opportunity have been widely documented at a global scale (Harvey, 2005). In the Indonesian case, the post-1998 reform period is generally characterised as one in which political liberalisation coexisted with persistent economic disparity, uneven access to education, and enduring regional inequality. The precise magnitude of these gaps is best captured through official national statistics on income distribution and educational participation; the present study reads such indicators not as its object of analysis but as the social backdrop against which these five novels are interpreted.

Read side by side, these five novels turn out to represent quite different kinds of inequality. *Saman* foregrounds gender inequality entangled with political repression against activists and plantation workers; *Pulang* foregrounds the political inequality experienced by exiles after the 1965 violence; *Lelaki Harimau* foregrounds the inequality between ordinary villagers and local elites, played out through violence; *Cantik Itu Luka* foregrounds economic and symbolic inequality rooted in colonial history; and *Orang-Orang Biasa* foregrounds economic inequality and unequal access to education among the post-reform lower class. Sociology of literature offers a general framework for reading this relationship between text and social structure (Ratna, 2003; Wellek et al., 1956), but the approach that has long dominated Indonesian scholarship Boelhower (1976) genetic structuralism as introduced by Purba (2010) tends to read inequality as a single, collective worldview, and is less attentive to exactly the kind of variation that becomes visible once these five novels are compared.

Pierre Bourdieu offers a more precise vocabulary for this variation. Rather than treating inequality as a single variable, Bourdieu (1986) separates it into distinct forms of capital economic, cultural, social, and symbolic each operating by its own logic and convertible into another only according to the rules of a specific field (Bourdieu, 1993) The concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) completes this picture by explaining why characters in these five novels so rarely resist inequality outright, and more often simply live it as something that feels natural given their social position. This framework remains comparatively underused in the study of contemporary Indonesian fiction relative to more general thematic or structuralist readings (Nuryanti et al., 2025) a gap this study aims to help close.

Stated plainly, the research gap addressed here is twofold. First, although Bourdieu's theory of capital is increasingly cited in Indonesian literary criticism, it is rarely operationalised: it tends to be invoked as a general vocabulary rather than applied through explicit, traceable indicators across a corpus of texts (Nuryanti et al., 2025). Second, Indonesian sociology-of-literature scholarship has seldom compared several novels at once within one consistent framework, so recurring cross-textual patterns of inequality remain difficult to discern. The novelty of this study therefore lies not in introducing Bourdieu to Indonesian criticism, but in operationalising his forms of capital as a comparative analytical grid applied consistently across five novels. Its intended implication for the development of Bourdieusian literary studies in Indonesia is primarily methodological: to demonstrate a repeatable procedure by which capital, habitus, and field can be converted from abstract concepts into concrete, auditable reading categories, providing a template that future studies can extend to larger corpora.

Specifically, this study asks: which themes of social inequality are most prominent across five selected contemporary Indonesian novels, and how do Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field explain the mechanisms behind each? Three aims follow: (1) to map

the main social theme and type of inequality in each novel; (2) to identify the Bourdieusian form of capital most relevant to explaining each theme; and (3) to compare the five novels in order to see which patterns of inequality are most dominant in contemporary Indonesian fiction. We hope these findings contribute both to Indonesian sociology-of-literature scholarship and to the broader international conversation on literature and inequality (Singer, 2011b); (Aktari-Sevgi, 2022)

This study feels worth doing for at least two reasons. First, academically, Indonesian sociology-of-literature scholarship still rarely compares more than two or three novels at once using one consistent theoretical framework; most studies stop at a single novel, so a bigger pattern which themes recur most often across contemporary Indonesian fiction as a whole -- is hard to see. Second, practically, these findings could be useful for teaching literature at the university level, particularly in sociology-of-literature or literary-criticism courses, since they offer a concrete example of how a foreign sociological theory like Bourdieu's can be applied systematically, rather than just mentioned as a general framework without any real operationalization.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study used a qualitative descriptive design within the sociology-of-literature tradition, combining close reading with directed content analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Moleong, 2017) A multiple case-study approach was chosen so that patterns of inequality could be compared across five texts with different social and historical settings (Yin, 2018)

Data Source

Primary data came from the full text of five contemporary Indonesian novels, selected purposively for their explicit representation of social inequality and their wide recognition within Indonesian literary discourse: *Saman* (Utami, 2021) *Pulang* (Chudori, 2013), *Lelaki Harimau* (Kurniawan, 2004) *Cantik Itu Luka* (Kurniawan, 2002) and *Orang-Orang Biasa* Nurachmana et al. (2020) Secondary data consisted of theoretical and empirical literature on Bourdieu's theory of practice and sociology of literature, as listed in the references.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each novel was read in full, and passages indicating its main social theme, the type of inequality foregrounded, and the most relevant Bourdieusian form of capital were marked, following the coding procedure of Miles et al. (2013), (Miles et al., 2013). The coded results were then organized into a comparative table (Table 1) and their proportions calculated based on the number of novels representing each theme (Table 2 and Figure 1). To strengthen trustworthiness, both researchers compared their coding independently and discussed any differences in interpretation until agreement was reached, following the peer-debriefing procedure recommended by Moleong (2017)

As a further note on our own position as researchers, both authors approached these five novels not as fully neutral readers, but as students of Indonesian Language and Literature Education who also carry some emotional and intellectual investment in the social issues each

novel raises. Keeping this in mind mattered during coding, so that our interpretations stayed grounded in concrete textual evidence rather than personal impressions of a character or event. As much as possible, every code assigned is backed by a quotation or paraphrase from the original text as an audit trail, so that other readers can trace back the basis for our interpretation.

Coding Sheet and Category Indicators

To make the coding procedure explicit and replicable, each novel was analysed using the coding sheet whose categories are defined in Table 4. For every text, coders recorded the location of the relevant passage, the main social theme, the type of inequality foregrounded, the operational indicator that justified the code, and the Bourdieusian form of capital deemed most relevant. The indicators for each inequality category were defined in advance, as set out below, and applied consistently across all five novels.

Table 1.*Operational Indicators for Each Inequality Category*

Inequality Category	Operational Indicators (textual cues)	Relevant Bourdieusian Concept
Gender inequality	Control, silencing, or sexualisation of the female body; constrained female agency; domestic subordination.	Symbolic capital / symbolic violence; women's habitus
Political inequality	State repression, exile, or loss of citizenship and voice; persecution linked to activism or dissent.	Cultural capital and the political field
Social-class inequality	Village-versus-elite power gaps; unequal access to protection, justice, or safety; inherited social standing.	Social capital; habitus; field
Educational inequality	Blocked access to schooling; failure of credentials to convert into economic opportunity or mobility.	Cultural (educational) capital; capital conversion

Table 5 illustrates the coding sheet in use, showing two example entries in which each code is tied to a paraphrased textual observation that functions as part of the audit trail. Verbatim quotations with page references from the primary texts are being compiled by the authors to accompany each coded entry.

Table 2.*Illustrative Entries from the Coding Sheet*

Novel	Coded Theme	Type of Inequality	Indicator Observed (paraphrased)
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Saman	Gender & political	Gender inequality; political repression	Control over women's bodies is treated as natural or protective; an activist is stripped of standing and forced into flight.
Orang-Orang Biasa	Education & economy	Educational inequality	Lack of access to decent education blocks the conversion of cultural capital into economic opportunity, prompting an extralegal shortcut.

Trustworthiness and Data Validation

Several procedures were used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis. First, investigator triangulation was applied: both authors coded each novel independently and then compared results, resolving discrepancies through discussion until consensus was reached, following the peer-debriefing procedure recommended by Moleong (2017). Second, every assigned code was tied to a specific passage in the primary text, producing an audit trail that allows each interpretation to be traced back to its textual basis (Miles et al., 2013). Third, the comparative logic of the multiple case-study design (Yin, 2018) served as a cross-check, since a coding decision in one novel had to remain consistent with the categories applied to the other four. Finally, the authors' disciplinary background and interpretive standpoint were treated as a factor to be monitored during coding rather than suppressed, in line with the reflexive stance recommended for qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Analytical Procedure

The full analytical procedure followed eight sequential stages, from corpus selection to the synthesis of capital interconnections, as summarised in Figure 2. Presenting the procedure as an explicit sequence is intended to make the study replicable and to clarify that the descriptive proportions reported later are derived from prior interpretive coding rather than from any statistical sampling.

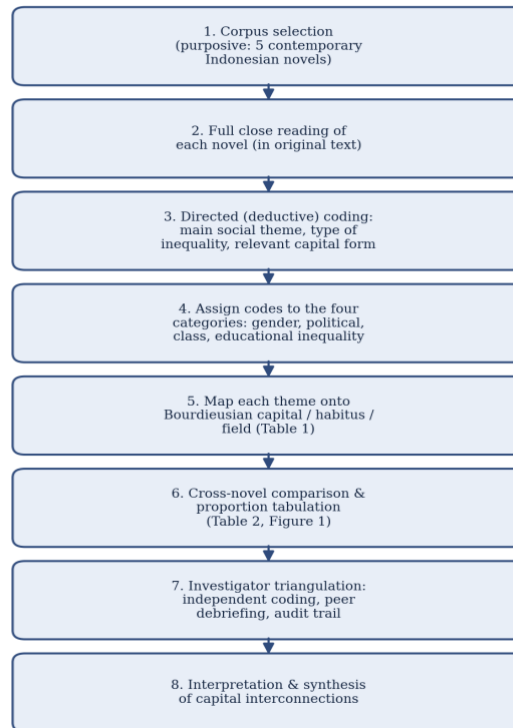


Figure 1. Flowchart of the analytical procedure.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Table 1 presents the mapping of the main social theme, type of inequality, and relevance to Bourdieu's theory for each of the five novels examined.

Table 3. Analysis of Social Inequality in Five Contemporary Indonesian Novels

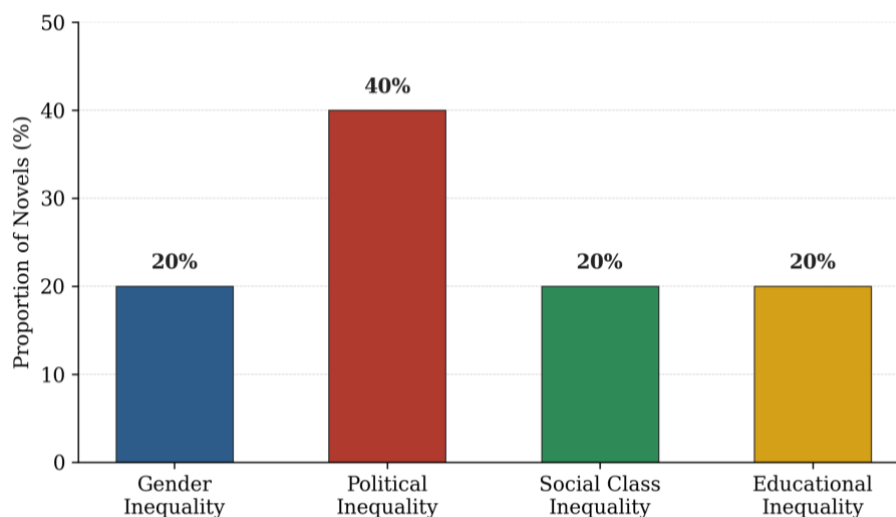
No.	Title & Author	Main Social Theme	Type of Social Inequality	Relevance to Bourdieu's Theory
1	Saman Utami (2021)	Gender, politics, sexuality	Gender inequality; political repression	Symbolic capital & women's habitus
2	Chudori (2013)	Political exile, identity	Political inequality & cultural access	Cultural capital & the political field
3	Lelaki Harimau (Kurniawan, 2004)	Violence, power relations	Village-vs-elite inequality	Village habitus & social capital
4	Cantik Itu Luka (Kurniawan, 2002)	Colonial trauma, class stratification	Economic & symbolic inequality	Postcolonial context; village marginalization
5	Orang-Orang Biasa (Nurachmana et al., 2020)	Education, economy, class struggle	Economic & symbolic inequality	Post-reform educational inequality

Based on Table 1, the four themes of social inequality gender, political, class, and education appear with different proportions across the five novels, as summarized in Table 2 and visualized in Figure 1.

Table 4.Proportion of Social Inequality Themes Across the Five Novels

Social Inequality Theme	Proportion of the Five Novels
Gender inequality	20% (1 of 5 novels)
Political inequality	40% (2 of 5 novels)
Social class inequality	20% (1 of 5 novels)
Educational inequality	20% (1 of 5 novels)

Figure 2. Distribution Of Social Inequality Themes Across Five Contemporary Indonesia Novels



Political inequality emerged as the most dominant theme, appearing in 40% of the novels examined (Saman and Pulang) two novels that both link state repression to the loss of voice and the loss of the right to return home. The three remaining themes gender, social class, and education each appear as the primary theme in a single novel (20%): gender inequality is most prominent in Saman (which also overlaps with the political theme), social-class inequality is most prominent in Lelaki Harimau, and educational inequality is most prominent in Orang-Orang Biasa. Cantik Itu Luka, while not counted as a separate dominant theme in Figure 1, displays a combination of economic and symbolic inequality rooted in colonial history, substantively complementing the four main themes. This pattern suggests that contemporary Indonesian novels most often foreground inequality stemming from the relationship between the state and its citizens (political), followed by inequality rooted in gender, class, and educational structures.

Tying this back to the theoretical framework in Section 2, the dominance of the political theme fits (Bourdieu, 1993) observation that the political field tends to have unusually wide reach, capable of shaping almost every other field including family life, the economy, and

even, as Saman shows, women's own bodies. At the same time, the appearance of gender, class, and education as secondary themes suggests that inequality in contemporary Indonesian fiction does not always operate at a national scale or connect directly to the state; some of it works at a much smaller, more personal scale, such as within a household or in access to a local school. The discussion that follows looks more closely at how these larger and smaller scales relate to one another within each novel.

A note on interpretation is warranted here. Because the corpus consists of only five purposively selected novels, the proportions reported above for example, 40% for political inequality should be read as a compact descriptive summary of this particular sample rather than as a statistical estimate that generalises to Indonesian fiction as a whole. The analytical weight of the study rests on the qualitative reading of how each form of capital operates within and across the novels, to which the discussion now turns; the percentages serve only to indicate which themes recur, not to quantify inequality itself.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Sociology of Literature

Sociology of literature begins from the premise that a literary work cannot be fully understood apart from the social conditions that produced it (Damono, 1979; Escarpit, 2005) Ratna (2022) divides the field into three strands: literature as a reflection of society, literature as a product of social institutions, and literature as something performing a social function for its readers. In Indonesia, the first strand remains dominant, largely through Boelhower (1976) genetic structuralism as popularized by Purba (2010) Yet, as Endraswara (2013) notes, this approach tends to treat social class as a fairly homogeneous category, which makes it harder to explain why, for instance, the inequality in Saman feels so different from the inequality in Orang-Orang Biasa, even though both emerge from the same broader unease about Indonesian social structure.

Capital, Habitus, and Field in Bourdieu's Theory

Bourdieu (1986) identifies four forms of capital that form the basis of this study's analytical framework. Economic capital covers wealth, income, and asset ownership. Cultural capital covers education, taste, and legitimately recognized knowledge, whether institutionalized (credentials), embodied (manners, speech), or objectified (books, artworks). Social capital is the value derived from membership in a network, while symbolic capital is the honor or prestige that legitimizes other forms of capital. These four forms are interrelated and can convert into one another, but only according to the rules of a specific field — a structured social arena with its own hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1993; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) The concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) explains how a person's social position shapes dispositions that feel natural to them, allowing inequality to persist without needing to be enforced by force (Bourdieu, 1998) Symbolic violence (Bourdieu et al., 1991) becomes especially relevant when reading how a woman's body, a village origin, or a family name is treated as a naturally occurring marker of social position, when it is in fact the product of a historically constructed power arrangement.

Analytical Framework for the Five Novels

Based on an initial reading of the five novels, this study grouped the represented forms of social inequality into four broad themes: gender inequality, political inequality, social-class inequality, and educational inequality. Each theme was then mapped onto the Bourdieusian form of capital most relevant to explaining it for instance, gender inequality in *Saman* was read through symbolic capital and women's habitus, while political inequality in *Pulang* was read through cultural capital and the political field. The full mapping is presented in Table 1.

Previous Studies

Several studies inform this framework. Widiastuti et al. (2023) trace the growing use of field theory in literary sociology, while Botelho et al. (2024) revisits the relationship between habitus and narrative form. Lionnet (2018) examine symbolic capital in postcolonial fiction, particularly relevant to reading *Cantik Itu Luka*. Within Indonesia, Tamrin (2025) examines representations of post-reform inequality through a broadly Marxian lens, and applies Bourdieusian concepts to a single Indonesian novel without extending the analysis across texts a gap this study addresses by comparing five novels within one consistent analytical framework. To clarify how the present study relates to and extends prior work, Table 3 summarises representative previous studies, their theoretical orientation, corpus scope, and the specific gap each leaves open.

Table 3. *Comparative Summary of Selected Previous Studies*

Study	Theoretical Orientation	Corpus / Scope	Gap Addressed by This Study
Widiastuti et al. (2023)	Bourdieu's field theory (systematic review)	Review of literary-sociology studies	Maps the uptake of field theory but does not apply it comparatively to novels.
Botelho et al. (2024)	Habitus and narrative form (conceptual)	Theoretical revisiting of literary sociology	Calls for critical, context-sensitive use of Western theory; no textual corpus applied.
(Lionnet, 2018)	Symbolic capital in postcolonial fiction	Postcolonial novels (non-Indonesian)	Focuses on symbolic capital alone; not a multi-novel Indonesian comparison.
Tamrin (2025)	Broadly Marxian lens	Post-reform Indonesian novel(s)	Reads inequality largely through class; less attentive to multiple capital forms.
Speller (2026)	Bourdieuian concepts	A single Indonesian novel	Applies Bourdieu to one text without extending the analysis across novels.
This study	Operationalised Bourdieu (capital, habitus, field)	Five contemporary Indonesian novels	Compares five novels within one consistent, operationalised analytical framework.

This Study's Position, and a Note on the Limits of Bourdieu's Theory

It is worth admitting upfront that Bourdieu's theory grew out of observations on mid-twentieth-century French society, so applying it to Indonesian novels cannot be done without some adjustment. A concept like 'field', for instance, assumes a reasonably clear boundary between one social arena and another something fairly easy to find in the French society Bourdieu studied, but not always so easy to find in Indonesian society, especially in rural areas, where kinship, economic, and political arenas often blend into a single, overlapping network. This study does not try to force Bourdieu's framework onto the texts rigidly; instead, it uses the framework as a flexible reading tool, staying open to the possibility that some parts of these novels may not fit neatly into Bourdieu's standard categories. This position follows Botelho et al. (2024) suggestion that literary scholars should not apply Western theory wholesale, but read it critically while remaining open to local context.

Discussion

Saman: Symbolic Capital, the Female Body, and Political Repression

Saman (Utami, 2021) actually pulls together two kinds of inequality that Indonesian literary scholarship tends to treat separately: gender inequality and political repression. Its female characters Laila, Shakuntala, Cok, Yasmin each wrestle with their own bodies and desires in a society that treats female sexuality as something that needs controlling. Saman himself, a former priest turned plantation-labor activist, ends up tortured and on the run because of his activism. Seen through Bourdieu et al. (1991), this kind of control over women's bodies works as a form of symbolic violence: domination that functions precisely because it's treated as natural, even protective, rather than openly forced. What happens to Saman shows something similar from another angle the state, as the authority running the political field, can strip an activist of symbolic capital whenever it wants, turning a respected figure into a fugitive, just by redrawing where the boundaries of that field sit (Bourdieu, 1993)

Pulang: Cultural Capital That Fails to Convert Within the Political Field

Pulang (Chudori, 2013) tells the story of the political inequality faced by Indonesian exiles after the 1965 violence, who lost their citizenship and were stuck in Paris for decades. Dimas Suryo and his circle aren't short on cultural capital they're fluent in foreign languages, well-read, plugged into an international intellectual scene. None of it counts for much politically, though, because the field they're up against, the Indonesian state under the New Order, has already decided they're threats rather than citizens (Bourdieu, 1986) What's interesting is the second generation, especially Lintang, who inherits a habitus shaped by her parents' displaced life but never quite fits in either France or Indonesia. Bourdieu (1990) has a term for this a disposition that no longer matches the field it finds itself in, something like feeling out of place in two countries at once.

Lelaki Harimau: Village Habitus Against Elite Social Capital

Where Pulang is about the state, Lelaki Harimau (Kurniawan, 2004) zooms in on something much smaller: the village, where domestic violence and the power imbalance

between ordinary residents and local elites take center stage. Margio, who is believed to turn into a white tiger, grows up in a village habitus shaped by poverty, domestic violence, and his family's total lack of legal protection. Inequality here isn't really about money it's more about who has the social capital to get protection, justice, or basic safety (Bourdieu, 1986). The elite family in the novel clearly has that capital; Margio's family doesn't. The violence that finally breaks out toward the end can be read as a kind of resistance that surfaces exactly when a habitus that had long accepted inequality as 'just how things are' finally hits its limit (Bourdieu, 1998)

Cantik Itu Luka: A Colonial Legacy in Economic and Symbolic Capital

Cantik Itu Luka (KURNIAWAN, 2002) takes the long view: economic and symbolic inequality rooted all the way back in the colonial era, and how that legacy keeps getting handed down. Dewi Ayu's beauty works as symbolic capital and, at the same time, as the very thing that gets her exploited by men in power, while land and wealth seized during colonial rule keep shaping her family's economic position for generations afterward. Because the novel stretches from the colonial period into the early years of independence, it shows something the other four novels in this study can't show quite as clearly: the field itself shifts every time the political regime changes, and capital that used to be worth something in one field can become worthless, or even dangerous, in the next one

Orang-Orang Biasa: Educational Inequality as the Root of Economic Inequality

One thing worth clarifying before we go further: Orang-Orang Biasa (Nurachmana et al., 2020) is actually set in contemporary, post-reform Indonesia, not the colonial period the original data mapping for this study had linked it to a colonial-era relevance that doesn't quite match the novel itself, so that needed straightening out. The novel follows a group of ordinary residents in Belitong who, lacking access to decent education and any real economic opportunity, end up plotting a bank robbery as a shortcut out of poverty. It's told as comedy, but read through Bourdieu (1986), there's a sharper point underneath: the cultural capital people are supposed to get through education, capital that's supposed to convert into economic capital through a decent job, is closed off to these characters from the start. An extralegal shortcut starts to feel more reasonable than waiting around for social mobility that never seems to show up. This novel rounds out the other four by showing that educational inequality isn't just background detail it's the engine that produces other kinds of inequality.

Cross-Novel Reading

Read together, these five novels suggest that contemporary Indonesian fiction treats social inequality not as a single condition, but as an interwoven set of capital forms that mutually shape one another a pattern also documented in international literary-sociology research (Singer, 2011b); (Aktari-Sevgi, 2022) The dominance of political inequality in two of the five novels (Saman and Pulang) shows how deeply the memory of an authoritarian state runs through Indonesian literary imagination, while the remaining three themes gender, class, and education show that more structural, everyday forms of inequality are equally worth reading closely. What unites all five novels is central argument: inequality is reproduced less through visible force than through the quiet workings of habitus and field, which make a given

social position feel natural to those living within it a dynamic these five novels render visible without ever needing to name Bourdieu directly.

Read against the post-reform Indonesian context, this pattern acquires additional weight. The end of the New Order in 1998 widened political and expressive freedoms, yet the same period left largely intact the economic and educational disparities that structure everyday life, so that the novels' recurring concern with blocked mobility and inherited disadvantage reflects a lived tension of the reform era rather than a purely historical memory. In Bourdieusian terms, this is precisely what the concepts of field and capital conversion help to specify: liberalisation reshaped the political field and the rules by which symbolic and cultural capital are recognised, but it did not equalise the underlying distribution of economic and social capital. The persistence of inequality across regime change visible when Cantik Itu Luka's colonial-era capital is set beside Orang-Orang Biasa's post-reform educational exclusion illustrates (Bourdieu, 1990, 1993) argument that habitus and field reproduce advantage across time even as their surface institutions are transformed.

Synthesis: How Forms of Capital Lock Into One Another

If there is one thread running through all five novels, it is that forms of capital rarely operate in isolation they tend to lock into each other in ways that make it hard for a character to simply step out of their position. Margio in *Lelaki Harimau* shows how a shortage of one kind of capital, in his case his family's economic standing, tends to close off access to another, such as the social capital needed for legal protection. Dimas Suryo in *Pulang* shows the reverse problem: he has plenty of cultural capital, but because the political field he is up against has changed its rules, that capital behaves like a currency no longer accepted in the country he has landed in. A similar pattern shows up with Dewi Ayu in *Cantik Itu Luka*, whose symbolic capital her beauty turns into a burden the moment it meets colonial and military power. In other words, these five novels quietly suggest that inequality isn't just about lacking one type of capital; it's about how a social system arranges things so that one shortage keeps shutting the door on other forms of capital as well.

It's also worth pointing out that the four themes gender, political, class, and educational inequality don't really sit in separate boxes. Gender inequality in *Saman*, for instance, can't really be separated from the political inequality Saman himself experiences as an activist; both trace back to the same field of state power, one that tries to regulate both citizens' bodies and their political voice. In the same way, the class inequality in *Lelaki Harimau* is bound up with a gender inequality hiding just underneath it the domestic violence suffered by Margio's mother. Reading these five novels side by side, contemporary Indonesian literature tends to present inequality as an interconnected web rather than a set of separate categories, and that, more than anything, is what a Bourdieusian reading adds compared to simply sorting these novels by theme.

CONCLUSION

This study found that five contemporary Indonesian novels *Saman*, *Pulang*, *Lelaki Harimau*, *Cantik Itu Luka*, and *Orang-Orang Biasa* represent social inequality through four main themes: gender, political, class, and educational inequality, with political inequality emerging as the most dominant. Using Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field, each novel highlights different forms of capital, including symbolic capital and women's habitus in *Saman*, cultural capital and the political field in *Pulang*, village habitus and social capital in *Lelaki Harimau*, economic and symbolic capital across generations in *Cantik Itu Luka*, and restricted cultural and educational capital in *Orang-Orang Biasa*. These findings demonstrate that inequality in contemporary Indonesian literature is multidimensional and interconnected, involving economic, cultural, social, political, and symbolic mechanisms rather than economic conditions alone.

This study is limited by the number of novels examined and the interpretive nature of qualitative coding. Future research could expand the literary corpus, incorporate reader-response data, and compare Indonesian literature with works from other countries with similar histories of authoritarianism. The findings also suggest that Bourdieu's framework can be operationalised into explicit and comparable reading categories, providing a useful alternative to general approaches to literary sociology. Practically, the framework and coding procedure offer a transferable model for teaching sociology of literature and literary criticism, while involving younger or student readers could further assess whether this approach is accessible and relevant to broader audiences. Overall, the study shows that contemporary Indonesian fiction portrays inequality as an interconnected system of capital, with political inequality as the most frequently foregrounded theme.

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