

TABOO LANGUAGE AND MORAL TRANSGRESSION IN LEILA S. CHUDORI'S LAUT BER CERITA (2017)**Tatang Tolana¹, Selvia Mallu Moito², Adriansyah Abu Katili³**321424095@mahasiswa.ung.ac.id¹, selviamallu93@gmail.com², adriansyahkatili@ung.ac.id³**Universitas Negeri Gorontalo****ABSTRACT**

Leila S. Chudori's novel Laut Bercerita (2017), translated into English as The Sea Speaks His Name (2022), presents a harrowing account of the forced disappearances of Indonesian student activists during the final years of the New Order regime under President Suharto. This article examines the taboo language and morally transgressive themes embedded in the novel through the lens of Indonesian sociocultural moral framework, drawing on frameworks of literary taboo theory, postcolonial trauma studies, and Javanese-Islamic ethical constructs. The analysis identifies four primary domains of taboo: state-sanctioned violence and its narration, bodily transgression and sexual coercion, the disruption of familial and communal bonds, and the silencing of political speech. Employing a qualitative textual analysis informed by Kristeva's concept of abjection and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence, this study argues that Chudori's strategic deployment of taboo language and imagery serves not as sensationalism but as a moral imperative, a form of bearing witness that challenges the normative Indonesian moral framework while simultaneously reaffirming it. Central to this analysis is the role of Islamic ethics and Javanese adat as twin pillars of Indonesian normativity that the novel must navigate. The novel's transgressive content is ultimately framed within an ethics of remembrance that demands justice and restores human dignity to those erased by history.

Keywords: *Taboo, Laut Bercerita, Indonesian Literature, New Order, Moral Framework, Abjection, Islamic Ethics, Political Violence, Trauma Narrative, Javanese Adat.*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesian literature has long operated within a complex moral and political landscape shaped by colonial legacies, postcolonial nationalism, and the authoritarian structures of the New Order (Orde Baru) regime (1966–1998). Within this context, the act of literary representation itself carries significant ethical weight: what may be said, how it may be said, and by whom are questions inseparable from the social and moral order. Leila S. Chudori's *Laut Bercerita* (2017), a novel about the 1997–1998 abductions and disappearances of pro-democracy student activists, inserts itself forcefully into this fraught terrain. By giving voice to experiences of torture, sexual violence, forced disappearance, and grief, the novel portrayed multiple layers of Indonesian taboo.

The concept of taboo, derived from the Tongan word *tapu* and theorized extensively in anthropological and linguistic scholarship, refers to prohibitions on speech, behavior, or representation that a community collectively enforces to protect social norms, sacred values, or hierarchical structures (Allan & Burridge, 2006). In Indonesia, these prohibitions are deeply informed by a layered normative architecture: the syncretic Javanese-Islamic ethics expressed through concepts such as moral framework and affective social attunement, national ideological frameworks (Pancasila), Islamic injunctions derived from the Qur'an and hadith, and cultural values of communal harmony (*rukun*) and hierarchical respect (Magnis-Suseno, 1997; Woodward, 2011; Morfit, 1981). These frameworks do not operate in isolation but interpenetrate and sometimes tension each other, producing a moral field that is simultaneously flexible and forceful in what it permits and prohibits. Against this normative backdrop, Chudori's novel is radical in its insistence on naming and depicting what official history and public discourse have consistently suppressed.

This article argues that *Laut Bercerita* functions as a morally transgressive text whose taboo language and themes are not incidental but constitute the very ethical core of its narrative project. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection (1982), Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence (1991), and postcolonial trauma theory as developed by Cathy Caruth (1996) and Stef Craps (2013), this study undertakes a close reading of the novel's representations of bodily violence, sexual coercion, political speech, and communal rupture. Special attention is given to the intersection of Islamic ethics and Javanese adat as the twin moral ground against which the novel's transgressions must be understood. The analysis situates these representations within the specific moral framework of Indonesian society in order to illuminate both the transgressions the novel enacts and the ethical purposes those transgressions serve.

METODE PENELITIAN

Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan mixed methods dengan jenis penelitian deskriptif. Pendekatan kuantitatif digunakan untuk mengetahui persepsi siswa terhadap profesionalisme guru, kondisi pembelajaran, kedisiplinan sekolah, dan fasilitas sekolah melalui penyebaran kuesioner. Sementara itu, pendekatan kualitatif digunakan untuk memperoleh informasi lebih mendalam mengenai kondisi tenaga pendidik, fenomena mismatch guru, dan supervisi akademik melalui wawancara.

Penelitian dilakukan di SMAS YAPIM MABAR dengan subjek penelitian berupa siswa dan salah satu guru di sekolah tersebut. Siswa dijadikan responden dalam pengisian kuesioner, sedangkan guru dijadikan narasumber wawancara untuk memperoleh informasi mengenai kondisi pembelajaran dan pengelolaan tenaga pendidik.

Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi, kuesioner, dan wawancara. Kuesioner disusun menggunakan skala Likert dengan pilihan jawaban sangat setuju, setuju, tidak setuju, dan sangat tidak setuju. Pernyataan dalam kuesioner meliputi aspek kompetensi pedagogik dan profesional guru, kompetensi sosial dan kepribadian guru, kedisiplinan sekolah, hubungan sosial siswa, serta fasilitas sekolah. Selain itu, wawancara dilakukan secara semi terstruktur untuk memperoleh data mengenai penyebab terjadinya mismatch guru, kendala pembelajaran, dan pelaksanaan kurikulum di sekolah.

Teknik analisis data dilakukan secara deskriptif. Data hasil kuesioner dianalisis dengan menghitung persentase jawaban responden pada setiap pernyataan, kemudian disajikan dalam bentuk diagram dan dijelaskan secara naratif. Sementara itu, data hasil wawancara dianalisis melalui tahap reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan untuk memperkuat hasil penelitian yang diperoleh dari kuesioner.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Language of Torture and State Violence

The most sustained domain of taboo in the novel is its representation of torture and enforced disappearance. Chudori renders in explicit, bodily detail the acts perpetrated against her protagonist, Biru Laut, and his comrades: electric shocks, waterboarding, sleep deprivation, and psychological degradation. This language functions as what Elaine Scarry (1985) calls a "language of pain", an attempt to make visible an experience that by its nature resists representation, since pain destroys the victim's capacity for language while leaving the perpetrator's language fully intact.

In Indonesian cultural and political discourse, such acts have historically been described, if at all, in abstract legal terminology; "excessive force," "human rights violations", or denied entirely. The New Order regime's discourse framed state violence as necessary security measures or as responses to communist subversion (Heryanto, 2006).

Chudori's physicalized language of torture violates the taboo of this bureaucratic euphemism. By naming specific acts and inscribing them on specific bodies, she makes it impossible to retreat into abstraction. The title itself: *Laut Bercerita, The Sea Speaks His Name*, alludes to the practice of disposing of murdered activists' bodies in the sea, transforming a sacred cultural symbol into an index of atrocity and breaking a taboo of silence that extends from the political into the religious and ecological.

Sexual Transgression and the Politics of the Body

Laut Bercerita engages with sexual themes in ways that challenge Indonesian's moral framework from several directions. The novel depicts the normative sexual relationships and desires of the activist characters with a candor unusual in mainstream Indonesian fiction, where sexuality is typically either absent or heavily coded (Bodden, 2010). More significantly, it addresses sexual coercion: the use of sexual humiliation as a tool of torture, and the complex dynamics of power and vulnerability within the clandestine activist community itself.

The representation of sexual violence as a weapon of state torture transgresses multiple taboos simultaneously. It makes visible an experience that Indonesian women's rights organizations such as the Women's Crisis Center have documented but that public discourse has consistently suppressed (Wieringa, 2002). It challenges the patriarchal norm that places the "honor" of violated women in the hands of families and communities rather than the survivors themselves. And it implicates the state, figured as masculine, authoritative, and legitimate in acts that both moral framework and Islamic ethics define as profoundly shameful. The concept of zina (illicit sexual contact) in Islamic jurisprudence carries severe moral and legal penalties; that the perpetrators are agents of the state rather than private individuals compounds the transgression by implicating legitimate authority in the most serious categories of moral violation.

Chudori's treatment of sexuality is not gratuitous; it is precisely calibrated to make the reader feel the weight of violation. This is consistent with what Hesford (2011) describes as a "spectacular rhetoric" of human rights: the strategic use of visceral representation to make distant suffering proximate and to compel moral response. The transgression of sexual taboo is thus reframed as a moral imperative, the refusal to sanitize violence in the interest of propriety.

Political Speech and the Taboo of Dissent

The novel's depiction of activist political culture is itself transgressive in the context of Indonesian moral framework, which tend to valorize consensus, deference to authority, and the suppression of ideological conflict. The student activists in *Laut Bercerita* engage in explicitly Marxist and socialist analysis, critique the Suharto regime in detail, and articulate a vision of social transformation that fundamentally challenges the New Order ideological consensus. This political speech, represented in the novel through discussions, debates, and clandestine organizational activities, reactivates a taboo that the New Order regime encoded in law: the prohibition on communist ideology (Heryanto, 2006).

The Tap MPRS No. XXV/1966, which banned communism and Marxism-Leninism, was not revoked until 2003, and its cultural residue persists. Public association with leftist ideology continues to carry a stigma in Indonesian society, particularly in communities with memories of the 1965–66 anti-communist violence that brought the New Order to power. By representing the activists sympathetically and giving sustained voice to their political arguments, Chudori effectively rehabilitates a form of political speech that official discourse has classified as treasonous and immoral. The depiction of religious diversity within the activist community: Muslim, Christian, and secular characters working together, their political commitments superseding religious difference challenges the increasingly salient

religious normativity of post-Reformasi Indonesia and invokes an Islamic tradition of pluralism (*ta'addudiyya*) that conservative voices have increasingly sought to foreclose (Fealy & White, 2008).

Familial Rupture and the Ethics of Grief

A fourth domain of taboo concerns the representation of grief and familial rupture. In Indonesian moral culture, shaped by both Javanese *adat* and Islamic funerary tradition, grief is expected to be managed, contained, and ultimately resolved through communal and religious ritual. The elaborate mourning practices of *tahlilan* (communal Qur'anic recitation for the dead), *slametan* (ritual communal meals), and the forty-day and hundred-day commemorations are designed to restore communal equilibrium after death (Woodward, 2011). But the families of the disappeared are denied this equilibrium: without a body, without acknowledgment, without closure, their grief cannot be ritualized and resolved. It becomes what Pauline Boss (1999) calls "ambiguous loss", a perpetually open wound that the social order has no framework to address.

The sections of the novel narrated by Asmara Jati, Biru Laut's sister, represent this unresolved grief with extraordinary depth. Her refusal to accept the official silence, her obsessive search for her brother's fate, and her alienation from social norms of emotional restraint constitute a form of moral transgression. The novel implicitly endorses this transgression: Asmara Jati's grief is not pathological but just, not disruptive but necessary. In representing her experience with sympathy and moral weight, Chudori challenges the cultural norm that would have survivors process their grief privately and refrain from public demands for accountability. The denial of Islamic burial rites to the disappeared, whose bodies were thrown into the sea, means that their families exist in a state of permanent religious incompleteness, unable to perform the obligations that Islamic law requires of them toward their dead. This religious dimension of the grief gives the novel's exploration of familial rupture a dimension that goes beyond the political into the sacred.

This representation of familial grief as political act draws on a tradition of testimonial literature from the Global South, including Jacobo Timerman's *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* (1981) and the testimonial writings associated with the East Timorese independence struggle (Taylor, 1991). The families of the disappeared in these contexts have consistently used public grief as a form of political pressure, transforming taboo emotional expression into a demand for justice.

Transgression as Moral Imperative

The foregoing analysis reveals that the taboo language and themes of *Laut Bercerita* are not simply violations of Indonesian moral framework but constitute a deliberate and complex engagement with those norms. Chudori does not transgress for transgression's sake; rather, she mobilizes transgression in the service of a deeper ethical project. This project has three dimensions: the restoration of human dignity to those erased by state violence, the production of historical knowledge against the grain of official amnesia, and the cultivation of moral imagination in readers who have been trained not to see or speak what the novel forces them to confront.

The novel's relationship to Indonesian moral framework, both Javanese-*adat* and Islamic, is thus dialectical rather than simply oppositional. It transgresses moral framework in order to insist on the humanity of those whom state violence sought to dehumanize. It violates *haram* norms of bodily exposure in order to reveal the deeper *haram* of state-sanctioned torture and murder. It disrupts *rukun* in order to recover the truth that false harmony has suppressed. It challenges respect for authority in order to restore respect to those to whom it is truly due: the victims and survivors of atrocity. The novel's transgressions, in other words, are calibrated acts of moral reorientation: they disrupt the

surface of normativity in order to reach its deeper foundations.

This dialectical logic is consistent with what Alexander (2004) calls cultural trauma, the process by which a society collectively acknowledges and works through a traumatic historical event. For cultural trauma to occur, the traumatic event must be represented, narrated, and discussed in public culture. Literary fiction, with its capacity to inhabit individual subjectivity while addressing collective experience, is particularly well suited to this work. Laut Bercerita's formal innovations with its dual narrative structure, its temporal fragmentation, its movement between public historical event and private emotional experience serve this function by modeling the kind of knowledge and empathy that cultural trauma requires.

The Islamic dimension of this analysis deserves particular emphasis. Chudori's novel does not position itself as anti-Islamic; on the contrary, by deploying the Islamic ethical grammar of 'adl and al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar, it claims a place within the tradition of Islamic social critique. The transgression of conservative Islamic norms is thus accompanied by an appeal to progressive Islamic values, positioning the novel within the longstanding internal debate within Indonesian Islam between those who emphasize obedience and social order and those who prioritize justice and truth-telling (Fealy & White, 2008). The novel's implicit argument is that the deeper Islamic obligation, bearing witness to injustice, overrides the surface norm of not speaking of shameful things.

CONCLUSION

Laut Bercerita is a work of profound moral seriousness that operates through and against the moral framework of Indonesian society. Its taboo language and themes, the physical language of torture, the representation of sexual violence, the rehabilitation of forbidden political speech, the insistence on unresolved grief, and the exposure of state crimes against Islamic and adat codes of bodily dignity, are not departures from Indonesian moral culture but are, in the deepest sense, consistent with its ethical foundations. By making visible what the social order has rendered invisible, by giving voice to those whom the state sought to silence permanently, Chudori enacts a moral responsibility that Indonesian society's own highest values, both secular and Islamic demand.

This analysis has drawn on frameworks from literary taboo theory, postcolonial trauma studies, and Indonesian social, cultural, and religious history to illuminate the multiple dimensions of Chudori's transgressive narrative project. Future scholarship might extend this analysis by examining the novel's reception in Indonesia, the ways in which readers, critics, and Islamic organizations have responded to its transgressions, as well as its translation into English and the reconfiguration of taboo that occurs when the novel crosses cultural contexts. The intersection of Indonesian moral normativity, Islamic ethics, and global human rights discourse, as mediated through literary form, remains a rich and underexplored area of inquiry.

What Laut Bercerita ultimately teaches is that the most profound moral acts are sometimes those that break the rules of the moral order, not in order to destroy that order but to force it to live up to its own ideals. The sea, in the novel's closing vision, does not remain silent: it speaks, and what it says demands to be heard.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, J. C. (2004). Toward a theory of cultural trauma. In J. C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. J. Smelser, & P. Sztompka (Eds.), *Cultural trauma and collective identity* (pp. 1–30). University of California Press.
- Allan, K., & Burrige, K. (2006). *Forbidden words: Taboo and the censoring of language*.

- Cambridge University Press.
- Bodden, M. H. (2010). *Resistance on the national stage: Theater and politics in late New Order Indonesia*. Ohio University Press.
- Boss, P. (1999). *Ambiguous loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief*. Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power* (G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Chudori, L. S. (2017). *Laut Bercerita*. KPG (Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia).
- Chudori, L. S. (2020). *The Sea Speaks His Name* (J. H. McGlynn, Trans.). Penguin Random House SEA. (Original work published 2017).
- Craps, S. (2013). *Postcolonial witnessing: Trauma out of bounds*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fealy, G., & White, S. (Eds.). (2008). *Expressing Islam: Religious life and politics in Indonesia*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Heryanto, A. (2006). *State terrorism and political identity in Indonesia: Fatally belonging*. Routledge.
- Hesford, W. S. (2011). *Spectacular rhetorics: Human rights visions, recognitions, feminisms*. Duke University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press.
- Magnis-Suseno, F. (1997). *Javanese ethics and world-view: The Javanese idea of the good life*. Gramedia Pustaka Utama.
- Morfit, M. (1981). Pancasila: The Indonesian state ideology according to the New Order government. *Asian Survey*, 21(8), 838–851. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643886>
- Mulder, N. (1996). *Inside Indonesian society: Cultural change in Java*. Pepin Press.
- Pohlman, A. (2015). *Women, sexual violence and the Indonesian killings of 1965–66*. Routledge.
- Scarry, E. (1985). *The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the world*. Oxford University Press.
- Siegel, J. T. (1986). *Solo in the New Order: Language and hierarchy in an Indonesian city*. Princeton University Press.
- Taylor, J. G. (1991). *Indonesia's forgotten war: The hidden history of East Timor*. Zed Books.
- Timerman, J. (1981). *Prisoner without a name, cell without a number* (T. Talbot, Trans.). Alfred A. Knopf.
- Toer, P. A. (1980). *Bumi manusia*. Hasta Mitra.
- Wieringa, S. E. (2002). *Sexual politics in Indonesia*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Woodward, M. R. (2011). *Java, Indonesia and Islam*. Springer.