

# Representation of the Abduction of Activists in the 1998 Tragedy in Literary and Non-Literary Texts: A Study of New Historicism

Stevanny Yosicha Putri<sup>1</sup>, Yoseph Yapi Taum<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Student in Master of Literature Program, Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

<sup>2</sup>Lecturer in Master of Literature Program, Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Corresponding Author: stevannyosicha@gmail.com<sup>1</sup>, yosephyapi@usd.ac.id<sup>2</sup>

---

**Abstract:** This research discusses the representation of the 1998 Tragedy on the abduction of activists in literary and non-literary works. The purpose of this research is to find out the interdiscursivity of the abduction of activists in the 1998 Tragedy in literary and non-literary works to reveal the episteme during the New Order transition. New Historicism theory is used in this research. This research found that the New Order created an authoritarian and militaristic government. In addition, students and activists were stigmatized as groups that endangered and threatened the authority of the government. As a result, their abduction and enforced disappearance were considered the right steps to maintain state security. Literature emerged as an attempt to demand justice and fight against forgetting the May 1998 Tragedy. The episteme of the New Order government was to perpetuate authoritarian power by taking repressive measures.

**Keywords:** 1998 tragedy, new order, abduction of activists, new historicism

---

Date of Submission: 15-11-2023

Date of acceptance: 30-11-2023

---

## I. INTRODUCTION

One of the human tragedies that has occurred in Indonesia is the May 1998 incident. This event began with student demonstrations demanding Soeharto as the ruler of the New Order step down from his position as president. In addition to the demonstrations, student activists who opposed New Order rule were kidnapped. Some of them have returned, and others are still unknown. According to the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (KONTRAS), the state has disappeared 23 people. One person has been declared dead, 9 people have been released, and 13 people are still missing (Kontras, 2017).

In 1997-1998, people were abducted and forcibly disappeared. In those years, the presidential election of the Republic of Indonesia for the period 1998-2003 took place. At that time, there were two important political agendas. The first was the 1997 General Election (PEM) and the second was the General Assembly (SU) of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) in March 1998, aimed at electing the President and Vice President of the Republic of Indonesia, who was still Soeharto as president. Activists, youth and students who were critical of the New Order government and sought to uphold justice and democracy where none existed before were abducted and disappeared. They were considered a group of people who endangered, undermined, threatened, and obstructed the government and state authority (Kontras, 2017).

Several literary works in Indonesia have featured the 1998 Tragedy in their stories. One such novel is *Laut Bercerita* by Leila Salikha Chudori. Inspired by the stories of activists who returned and those who did not return. Obtained from direct stories from various sources to the author. In addition, this novel also tells the story of the families of kidnap victims who still have not received certainty about those who disappeared. The novel also describes the efforts of the families of the abductees and disappeared to demand justice for the fate of those who disappeared. One of the efforts made is the *Kamisan Action* (Chudori, 2022).

Activist abductions, deaths and injuries were not the only results of Tragedy 1998. The year 1998 was made worse by the looting of businesses owned by Chinese Indonesians and the rape of Chinese women. This was in line with the condition of Indonesia, which was affected by the monetary crisis. The economy challenged Indonesian society. The New Order government's policies could not address this problem. Even from the initial economic crisis that developed into a crisis of confidence in the government. This was compounded by the dominance of certain political parties and the power of the president backed by the armed forces, which in turn could further hinder democracy. The large social gap between the upper and lower classes is also a frequent source of ethnic conflict. Thus, in the May 1998 riots there was also looting, destruction and arson in ethnic Chinese-owned settlements and shops (Ginting, et al. 2019).

---

The series of kidnappings, disappearances, persecutions, killings, looting, and rapes that occurred in the 1998 Tragedy have not yet found a bright spot for the victims and their families to get justice. The dominant discourse that has developed since the 1998 Tragedy is the image of activists and students who carry out demonstrations and their ideas and thoughts are seen as a threat that can hamper the running of the New Order government. This has led to a series of human rights violations in the 1998 Tragedy being seen as normal. Activists, students, and people of Chinese descent were considered to have been treated as such. The authoritarian and militaristic New Order government had the right to fight and silence people who were considered a threat to the authority of the state. The new rulers of the Indonesian government have not even been able to resolve cases of human rights violations in the past. Thus, the atrocities of the regime can be read in "every corner and towering side". The extent of the regime's criminality in political will is to remember or forget tragedies and to dare or fear to prosecute human rights violators (Andalas, 2016).

Based on the above background, this research problem focuses on the representation of the abduction of activists in the 1998 Tragedy in literary and non-literary texts using the new historicism study by Stephen Greenblatt. According to new historicism, literature cannot be separated from the social, economic and political practices that occurred in the same period. One of the theories of new historicism literary criticism is that literary works should be seen as a product of the time, place, and environment of their creation, not just as an extraordinary work of genius. Modern historical theory emphasizes the relationship between the components of a text and the social forces that shape it. In addition, the relationship of interdiscursivity with non-literary works created at the same time is also important (Taum, 2021).

Previous research using the material object of Leila S. Chudori's novel *Laut Bercerita* using the New Historicism study has also been conducted by Derri Ris Riana in his writing entitled "Reconstruction of 1998 History in a New Perspective: A Study of Leila S. Chudori's Novel *Laut Bercerita*". This research describes state power in the construction of the 1998 reformation events; student and family movements before and after the 1998 tragedy; and representations of economic and cultural history before and after the 1998 tragedy (Riana, 2021). The research only focuses on the reconstruction of history that occurred before, during, and after the 1998 Tragedy in the novel *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S. Chudori. The researcher has not been able to clearly show the interdiscursive relationship between literary texts and non-literary texts. The researcher also did not show literary texts and non-literary texts in the same historical period to be used in conducting parallel reading method. The episteme contained in the 1998 Tragedy using New Historicism studies has also not been presented in this research.

Based on this consideration, the current research does not aim to describe the reconstruction of history in the novel *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S. Chudori. This research will find the interdiscursivity of the abduction of activists in the May 1998 Tragedy in literary and non-literary texts. It aims to reveal the episteme during the New Order transition by using New Historicism studies to improve previous research. It is hoped that the results of this research will benefit the field of Indonesian literary research, especially in the application of new historicism theory in literary works. In addition, the results of this study invite the Indonesian people not to forget the nation's history and participate in fighting for the resolution of human rights violations in the past. They can also participate in preventive efforts so that the events in 1998 do not happen again in the future. The community is also increasingly raising awareness about cultural diversity and increasing national integration.

## **II. EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE**

This research uses the paradigm proposed by M.H. Abrams as an approach to researching literary works. Abrams introduced four axiomatic models of literary approaches. The four approaches include the expressive approach that focuses on the writer, the mimetic approach that focuses on the universe, the pragmatic approach that focuses on the reader, and the objective approach that focuses on the work itself (Taum, 2023: 18). The M.H. Abrams paradigm provides a reference for relatively more detailed and diverse research insights. Therefore, this paradigm was repositioned by Taum into six approaches based on his study and reflection. There are two approaches added to Abrams' scheme, namely the discursive approach and the eclectic approach. The discursive approach focuses on literary discourse as a discursive practice. The eclectic approach selectively combines various approaches to understand a phenomenon (Taum, 2023: 21).

This research will use a discursive approach. One of the theories in the discursive approach is the theory of New Historicism literary criticism. The method used in this research is the method of negotiating literary texts and non-literary texts to find out the ideological function of the text and the thick description method to examine complex layers of meaning by

examining the details (Taum, 2021). The data sources used are literary texts and non-literary texts that represent the abduction of activists in the May 1998 Tragedy. The literary text used in this research is the novel *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S. Chudori published by KPG (Kepustakaan Popular Gramedia), 44th printing, June 2022. The non-literary texts used are scientific articles related to the formal object of research and articles from mass media that discuss the abduction of activists in 1998, namely "Cases of Abduction and Enforced

Disappearance of Activists 1997-1998: Who is Responsible?" ([www.kontras.org](http://www.kontras.org)), "Kamisan Action, Struggle of Families of Victims of Human Rights Violations to Demand State Responsibility" ([www.tempo.co](http://www.tempo.co)).

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section will analyze the interdiscursiveness of the abduction and enforced disappearance of 1998 activists in literary and non-literary texts. The May 1998 tragedy was an event that occurred during the transition from New Order rule to the Reformation period. The reformation that was finally obtained after a long time demanded by activists and students had to leave deep wounds and trauma for the victims and their families who are still alive today. The May 1998 tragedy also became one of the darkest histories for the Indonesian people. Those who disappeared and never returned have not received justice because their whereabouts are unknown and the perpetrators of the abduction have never been brought to justice until now.

Efforts to find out the fate and whereabouts of their family members who have disappeared and whose whereabouts are unknown became the basis for the formation of the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (KONTRAS). KONTRAS is a human rights organization established on 20 March 1998. This organization was formed at the initiative of a number of pro-democracy activists from various backgrounds in Indonesia. At the beginning of its establishment, KONTRAS had a main focus on advocating cases of abduction and enforced disappearance, which became a serious crime that was rampant under the New Order government (Kontras, 2017).

Several literary works in the form of novels in Indonesia have used the May 1998 Tragedy as the background of the story. One of them is *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S. Chudori. This novel tells the story of the abduction, enforced disappearance, persecution of 1998 student activists, and the efforts made by the families of the abductees. The novel consists of two acts. The first chapter takes the point of view of Biru Laut, a main character in the novel who represents the student activists in recounting the events of the abduction and persecution they experienced. The second act uses the point of view of Asmara Jati, the younger sister of Biru Laut, who represents the families of the missing student activists to fight for justice for them.

The novel mentions the number of returned and unreturned activists. In this novel, nine student activists were returned, including Alex, Daniel, Naratama, Coki, Hamdan, Arga Masagi, Hakim Subali, Harun, and Widi Yulianto (Chudori, 2022: 249-250). Meanwhile, 13 people who have not returned are mentioned, including Gala Pranaya, Kasih Kinanti, Sunu Dyantoro, Julius Sasongko, Dana Suwarsa, Narendra Jaya, Widi Yulianto, and Biru Laut (Chudori, 2022: 337, 363). The number of activists who have returned and have not returned is the same as the data provided by KONTRAS, 2017 edition of *Against Forgetting*, where 9 people have returned and 13 people have not returned. However, the names of the characters in the novel are fictitious, and do not match the names of the actual activists.

This shows that the abduction of the activists was true and not just a fiction. The data collected by KONTRAS proves that the New Order government used authoritarianism and militarism to run its government. The government's acts of repression that used violence as the main tool to achieve political stability demonstrated the authoritarianism system. In addition, opposition forces were also limited by the establishment of intelligence agencies, such as BAKIN (Intelligence Coordinating Agency) and BAIS (Strategic Intelligence Agency), which consisted of soldiers. In addition, the Kopkamtib agency, which functioned for twenty years before being replaced by Bakorstanas in 1988, was responsible for the activities of the press and individuals who opposed the government. This organization became the most repressive and frightening as they had the ability to make arrests at any time (Farchan, 2022).

Militarism because the military dominated the highest positions in the state bureaucracy, legislature and executive during the New Order. The military occupied strategic political positions that ran the wheels of state government, such as ministers, governors, regents, members of Golkar, and sat as their representatives in the DPR. The Army was the most dominant force in both the civilian government and the military during the New Order (Sumantri, 2017). In the novel *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S. Chudori, Biru Laut and his fellow activists became fugitives because of their activities that criticized the policies carried out by the New Order government. They also carried out activities that aimed to help the people voice protests and fight against government regulations. The following is an excerpt from the novel.

Two years ago, before we were declared fugitives by the government, Kinan was assigned to Tandes, Surabaya, along with Sunu, Julius, Gusti and Naratama. They were escorting workers from 10 factories to hold a demonstration demanding a wage increase.  
(Chudori, 2022: 91)

Before the Blangguan Corn Planting action, there was 'Kwangju'. If Blangguan was the action that stuck with us the longest and the Ngawi action was considered a success, then long before that we had learned from the failure of the 'Kwangju discussion'.  
(Chudori, 2022: 112-113)

The people who kidnapped Biru Laut and his friends were described as wearing seibo masks, being well-built, having pistols, wearing dark-colored Kijang vehicles, jagged shoes, and using handy talkies. They also put Biru Laut and his friends into a basement that was made to look like a holding cell when they were kidnapped. Based on these characteristics, it is likely that the kidnappers were members of the military. Here's an excerpt.

I saw several well-built men wearing seibo, a woolen face covering.  
But one of them pointed a cold object at my back. My whole body felt stiff because I knew it was the muzzle of a gun.  
(Chudori, 2022: 52)

I only saw two dark-colored Kijang vehicles waiting for us with their engines running.  
(Chudori, 2022: 54)

Before I could guess our location, I suddenly heard the sound of a handy talkie squeaking from the direction of the front seat.  
(Chudori, 2022: 55)

It was only then that I realized I was in a detention room almost in the shape of a lion cage in a circus. The only difference was that this prison only had bars on the front and top. My left and right sides were covered with walls.  
(Chudori, 2022: 143)

The multiple bruises from the thumps and kicks and the wounds from the stomps of their jagged shoes caused an unbearable sting every time I splashed them with water.  
(Chudori, 2022: 147)

The description of the perpetrators of the abduction of activists in the novel *Laut Bercerita* points to members of the military, as written on the KONTRAS page. The perpetrators of the abduction and enforced disappearance of activists in 1997-1998, according to the Source of the Report of the Ad Hoc Team of the POSP 1997-1998. 301 is the Mawar Team. The Mawar Team was a team formed under Group IV of the Special Forces Command (KOPASSUS) that received direct and written orders from the Kopassus Commander General (Danjen) Major General Prabowo Subianto. The order was given to the Commander of Group 42, Kopassus, Colonel Chairawan, and then to the Commander of Battalion 42, Major Bambang Kristiono. The policy and practice of enforced disappearance was then continued under the leadership of Major General. TNI. Muchdi Pr and the abductions continued (Kontras, 2017).

Furthermore, the Kamisan Action and the establishment of the Missing Persons Commission are told in the second half of *Laut Bercerita* from Asmara Jati's perspective. The families of the activists who had not returned began to gather to seek justice and certainty about the fate of their family members. Anjani worked with Biru Laut's friends who were able to return to find the facts about the disappearance of Biru Laut and others. The Missing Persons Commission was formed by Anjani and Aswin. Here's an excerpt.

It was then that Aswin invited me to join and help build the Missing Persons Commission.  
(Chudori, 2022: 147)

It wasn't until September, after the Commission for the Disappeared held a Tenda of Concern where Gus Dur—a man I greatly respect—was present, that Aswin and friends from other NGOs decided to make the entire family part of the Commission for the Disappeared organization so that the search for activists would not be forgotten by the government.  
(Chudori, 2022: 261)

In addition to establishing the Commission for the Disappeared, in *Laut Bercerita* there is another effort by the families of the missing activists, namely the Kamisan Action. On that fourth Thursday in early 2007, under the twilight sun, in front of the State Palace, we stood in black shirts shaded by hundreds of black umbrellas. We didn't shout or surge, but spoke out in silence. The sweat of the afternoon sun soaked our clothes, but that only made the atmosphere more communal.

Naratama and a group of foreign and local journalists photographed, filmed and interviewed the parents, Bram and Aswin. Alex tried to capture photos of mothers, brothers, sisters, nephews, wives, girlfriends

holding 13 photos of those who had not returned, including Sunu Dyantoro, Julius Sasongko, Gala Pranaya, Widi Yulianto, Kasih Kinanti, Narendra Jaya ....  
(Chudori, 2022: 363)

Until now, Kamisan actions continue to be carried out to demand cases of enforced disappearances of activists in 1998 and other human rights violations. The human rights violations discussed include the 1965 Tragedy, Semanggi I, Semanggi II, Trisakti, the May 13-15 Tragedy 1998, the Talangsari case, the Tanjung Priok case, and other victims of human rights violations, including the murder of human rights activist Munir. However, until now, the resolution of cases of past human rights violations still faces challenges and difficult challenges (Tempo, 2022). The next Kamisan action is a call to the president of Indonesia to resolve humanitarian cases. In addition, this action is a planned form of protest against the government's use of violence (Andalas, 2016).

The Kamisan action can also be a reminder that the country's leaders to date have not been able to resolve cases of past human rights violations. In fact, the state should be fully responsible for all forms of human rights violations experienced by its citizens. Families of victims of past human rights violations, including the enforced disappearance of 1998 activists, still persist to this day to seek certainty about the fate of their family members. There are still cries and wails of a mother seeking clarity about the fate of her missing child. Their wailing is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of their strength to keep fighting.

A mother named Maria Katarina Sumarsih stated in a Tempo Magazine article covering the Kamisan Action that she will continue to hope despite its small size. She still wants justice for the death of her son, Bernadinus Realino Norma Irawan, also known as Wawan, who was shot dead on November 13, 1998 at Jakarta's Atma Jaya Catholic University. She does not know who killed her son. This mother is in a very difficult situation of forgiveness and resentment. Who should she forgive? Who else should she hold a grudge against? (Tempo, 2022).

The feelings of one of the mothers of victims of the 1998 tragedy are representative of the feelings of all other families of victims of past human rights violations. They only demand certainty, justice and accountability from the state. So, in addition to fighting for all of that through the institutions and actions that have been running. Literature is here to help them voice their hearts. Through literary works, such as the novel *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S. Chudori, more people know and feel their struggle. Generations that are getting further away from the time of the 1998 Tragedy will forget or even not know the darkness of this event and have less sympathy for the Kamisan Action. So, literature is the best medium that can be used to remember and fight.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The novel *Laut Bercerita* shows the authoritarian and militaristic power of the government at the time through the abduction of activists. The use of dark vehicles and masks suggests direct military involvement in the act. This shows that activist groups served as a battleground between those who opposed injustice and those who wanted to maintain power. The 1998 tragedy depicted in literary and non-literary works is not only the ugly side of the event, but also the transition period from the New Order to Reformation. To respond to the crime, the Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KONTRAS) was formed. Literature serves as a medium to remember and voice the truth and the struggle of the victims against the authoritarian government. It not only shows historical facts, but also discusses the social and political dynamics that occurred during the transition of power.

#### REFERENCES

- [1]. Andalas, Patrisius Mutiara. 2016. "Aksi Kamisan: Ratapan Perempuan, Kriminalitas Rezim & Ruang Demokrasi" Accessed from <http://repository.usd.ac.id/6041/> on 20/10/2022
- [2]. Chudori, Leila S. 2022. *Laut Bercerita*. Jakarta: KPG (Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia)
- [3]. Farchan, Yusa. 2022. "Dinamika Sistem Politik Otoritarianisme Orde Baru" in *Jurnal ADHIKARI*, Vol. 1, No. 3, (2022), hlm. 152-161, Banten. Accessed from <https://www.jurnal-adhikari.id/index.php/adhikari/article/view/41/29> on 21/10/2022
- [4]. Ginting, dkk. 2019. "Etnis Tionghoa pada Peristiwa Kerusuhan Mei 1998 di Jakarta" in *Jurnal PESAGI*, Vol. 7, No. 5, (2019), Lampung: Universitas Lampung. Accessed from <http://jurnal.fkip.unila.ac.id/index.php/PES/article/view/19728/pdf> on 18/10/2022
- [5]. Riana, Derri Ris. 2021. "Rekonstruksi Sejarah 1998 Dalam Perspektif New: Kajian Atas Novel *Laut Bercerita* Karya Leila S. Chudori", dalam *Multilingual* Vol. 20, No. 2, (2021), hlm. 194-207, Kalimantan Selatan. Accessed from <https://scholar.archive.org/work/gv6gv6tidbhtbyxkk2phpnxje/access/wayback/https://multilingual.kemdikbud.go.id/index.php/MULTILINGUAL/article/download/224/209> on 20/01/2023
- [6]. Sumantri, Pulung. 2017. "Dominasi Militer (Angkatan Darat) Dalam Pemerintahan Orde Baru" dalam *PUTERI HIJAU*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (2017), hlm. 63-70, Medan: Universitas Negeri Medan. Accessed from <https://jurnal.unimed.ac.id/2012/index.php/ph/article/view/9092> on 21/10/2022
- [7]. Taum, Yoseph Yapi. 2021. "New Historicism Dalam Kajian Sastra" in *Makalah Materi pertemuan Upgrading Dosen Program Studi Bahasa dan Sastra Arab, Fakultas Adab dan Ilmu Budaya, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta*, page. 1-29.

- [8]. Taum, Yoseph Yapi. 2023. Sastra, Teori-Teori Kritis, dan Responsnya Terhadap Permasalahan Global. Yogyakarta: Sanata Dharma University Press
- [9]. “Aksi Kamisan, Perjuangan Keluarga Korban Pelanggaran HAM Tuntut Tanggung Jawab Negara” Accessed from <https://www.google.com/amp/s/nasional.tempo.co/amp/1637035/aksi-kamisan-perjuangan-keluarga-korban-pelanggaran-ham-tuntut-tanggung-jawab-negara> on 19/10/2022
- [10]. “Kasus Penculikan dan Penghilangan Paksa Aktivis 1997-1998: Siapa Bertanggung Jawab?” Accessed from <https://kontras.org/2017/05/23/kasus-penculikan-dan-penghilangan-paksa-aktivis-1997-1998-siapa-bertanggung-jawab/> on 18/10/2022