Indonesian Journal of Politics and Literary Studies
Vol. 1, No. 3, September 2026, pp. 206~216
ISSN: 3163-3811, DOI: https://doi.org/10.67490/ijpl.v1i3.1043

Novel as political witness: narrative form, collective memory, and democratic anxiety in post-reform Indonesia

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Aug 18, 2026
Revised Sep 20, 2026
Accepted Sep 30, 2026

Keywords:

collective memory;
democratic anxiety;
Indonesian novels;
narrative form;
political witness.

ABSTRACT

Background: Post-Reform Indonesian fiction has become a crucial cultural arena for negotiating unresolved histories of authoritarian violence, exile, minority vulnerability, colonial memory, and democratic uncertainty. **Objective:** This study examines how selected post-Reform Indonesian novels function as political witnesses through narrative form, collective memory mediation, and representations of democratic anxiety. **Method:** This study applies qualitative interpretive literary analysis by combining close reading, narratological analysis, and memory-oriented thematic coding of a curated corpus of twelve publicly verifiable post-Reform Indonesian novels, supported by secondary scholarship and contextual sources. **Results:** Narrative witnessing appears most strongly through fragmented temporality, silence, polyphonic voice, embodied memory, and spatialized remembrance. Collective memory is mediated through family transmission, exile and return, counter-memory, minority belonging, gendered bodily experience, and regional location rather than through a singular national chronology. Democratic anxiety emerges where novels connect authoritarian residue, distrust of official truth, unfinished justice, precarious citizenship, and refusal of reconciliatory closure. **Implication:** This study shows that literary form can disclose democratic unease without reducing fiction to documentary evidence or causal political proof. **Novelty:** This study offers an integrated framework that links narrative form, collective memory, and democratic anxiety in post-Reform Indonesian literary analysis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Post-Reform Indonesia is marked by an unresolved contradiction between democratic transition and unsettled political memory. Since 1998, Indonesia has formally moved beyond New Order authoritarianism, yet several violent pasts remain publicly contested rather than institutionally settled. The stakes are not abstract. The International People's Tribunal 1965 reported the murder of an estimated 400,000–500,000 people and the imprisonment of around 600,000 after 1965, while the Joint Fact-Finding Team on the May 1998 riots, as recalled by Komnas Perempuan, recorded 85 cases of sexual violence, including 52 rape cases. These figures indicate not only historical injury but also the difficulty of public acknowledgment. Novels written after Reformasi therefore occupy a crucial cultural position: they do not replace legal truth, but they can preserve affective, fragmented, and intergenerational memories where official discourse remains selective, defensive, or incomplete (Eddyono, 2023 [1]; Leksana & Subekti, 2022 [2]).

Recent scholarship has established that Indonesian literature is a significant site for working through historical violence, collective trauma, exile, and minority vulnerability. Eddyono (2023) [1] demonstrates how post-New Order official narratives continue to reorganize silence around 1965, while Leksana and Subekti (2022) [2] show that third-generation memory often survives through fragmented familial narration. Studies of fiction have further examined colonial memory in Indonesian novels (S. et al., 2025) [3], Chinese Indonesian violence in Post-New Order fiction (Widodo & Andalas, 2024) [4], post-exile identity in Leila S. Chudori's Pulang (Tamba & Harahap, 2024) [5], and collective trauma in Ayu Utami's Saman and Enrico's Love Story (Mayasari-Hoffert, 2025) [6]. Beyond Indonesia, Bozyer (2024) [7] and Kianpour et al. (2025) [8] broaden collective memory debates across literature, exile, diaspora, and mediated identity. What remains less developed is a systematic account of how narrative form itself becomes a political technology for registering democratic anxiety.

This study examines how post-Reform Indonesian novels operate as political witnesses through their formal organization of memory, voice, time, and silence. Rather than asking whether fiction accurately reproduces historical events, this study asks how novels make unresolved political violence narratable under conditions of partial democracy, inherited fear, and contested remembrance. Three questions guide this inquiry: how do selected post-Reform novels construct witnessing through narrative form; how do they mediate collective memory across personal, familial, ethnic, colonial, and national registers; and how do their formal strategies express anxiety about the unfinished character of democratic transition? This formulation allows literary analysis to remain attentive to form while engaging historical and political contexts. It also prevents the argument from reducing novels to documentary supplements, because the central object is not factual reconstruction alone but the ethical and aesthetic mediation of public memory.

This study advances the argument that post-Reform Indonesian novels become political witnesses precisely when they refuse linear closure, singular authority, and reconciliatory certainty. Fragmented chronology, polyphonic narration, spectral return, testimonial silence, and displaced focalization do not merely decorate political themes; they give form to a democracy haunted by impunity, erasure, and incomplete recognition. This argument resonates with Jaya's (2026) [9] reading of Indonesian women's travel writing as political intervention, because mobility, voice, and perspective can reorganize dominant political imagination. It also extends trauma-oriented literary readings by linking narrative form to democratic anxiety, not only to memory recovery. The implication is methodological as well as theoretical: close reading must be combined with memory-sensitive coding so that interpretation distinguishes textual evidence, formal pattern, political inference, and broader democratic significance without converting literary representation into causal proof.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Collective memory

Collective memory is not a neutral storage of past events but a social process through which communities select, transmit, dispute, and institutionalize remembrance. Halbwachs [10] conceptualizes memory as socially framed, while Assmann [11] distinguishes communicative memory from culturally stabilized memory. Ricoeur [12] further stresses that memory is inseparable from forgetting, interpretation, and ethical responsibility. Recent scholarship on Indonesia confirms this contested character: Eddyono (2023) [1] shows how official narratives after the New Order selectively erase the 1965 massacre, while Leksana and Subekti (2022) [2] argue that memory of anti-leftist violence survives through fragmented intergenerational narration. Thus, memory in this study is treated as conflictual rather than restorative.

The main indicators of collective memory in literary analysis include intergenerational transmission, mnemonic fragmentation, counter-memory, silence, and symbolic return. Hirsch's notion [13] of postmemory helps explain how later generations inherit traumatic histories they did not directly experience, while Nora's lieux de mémoire [14] clarifies how texts become sites where endangered memories are preserved and contested. Indonesian literary scholarship illustrates these aspects across different historical wounds: S. et al. (2025) [3] examine Dutch colonial memory in Indonesian fiction, Widodo and Andalas (2024) [4] revisit Chinese Indonesian violence in Post-New Order fiction, and Tamba and Harahap (2024) [5] trace post-exile identity in Pulang. These categories allow memory to be read as textual practice.

2.2. Narrative form

Narrative form refers to how fiction organizes voice, time, perspective, plot, silence, and textual authority. Formalist and narratological traditions, from Bakhtin's [15] polyphony to Genette's [16] account of temporality and focalization, reject any simple separation between what a novel says and how it says it. White's [17] theory of historical emplotment also suggests that narrative form shapes historical intelligibility rather than merely representing prior facts. In contemporary Indonesian literary studies, Mayasari-Hoffert (2025) [6] demonstrates that trauma in Saman and Enrico's Love Story emerges through silence, bodily memory, and disrupted expression. Narrative form therefore becomes a mode of political knowledge.

The central indicators of narrative form in this study include fragmented chronology, shifting focalization, testimonial voice, polyphonic narration, spectral presence, and strategic opacity. Fragmentation signals histories that cannot be fully integrated into official chronology; polyphony allows competing social voices to disturb a single authoritative account; silence reveals both repression and ethical limits of representation. Bozyer's (2024) [7] work on literary frontiers of collective memory supports this view by showing how narrative space can stretch, displace, and complicate inherited remembrance. Jaya (2026) [9] similarly treats women's travel writing as political intervention, suggesting that mobility, perspective, and narrative positioning can challenge dominant historical imagination.

2.3. Democratic anxiety

Democratic anxiety describes a condition in which formal democratic transition coexists with unresolved violence, weak recognition, inherited fear, and distrust toward public truth. It differs from democratic failure because it does not assume total collapse; rather, it names an unstable political mood produced when democratic institutions cannot fully repair authoritarian residues. LaCapra's [18] distinction between acting out and working through is useful here, since societies may repeatedly revisit trauma without achieving ethical reckoning. In Indonesia, Eddyono (2023) [1], Leksana and Subekti (2022) [2], Widodo and Andalas (2024) [4], and Tamba and Harahap (2024) [5] collectively show that post-Reform memory remains shaped by erasure, exile, minority vulnerability, and unfinished justice.

The indicators of democratic anxiety in literary narrative include suspicion toward reconciliation, recurrence of authoritarian residue, distrust of official history, vulnerability of minority subjects, and refusal of narrative closure. These indicators connect political context with form without turning fiction into documentary evidence. Kianpour et al. (2025) [8] show that collective memory is increasingly mediated through narrative circulation, identity, and public contestation, while Indonesian fiction demonstrates how such mediation occurs through novels as culturally durable forms. This study therefore positions post-Reform novels as political witnesses: not because they deliver final historical truth, but because they formalize unresolved memory as democratic unease.

3. METHOD

This study uses post-Reform Indonesian novels as its unit of analysis, supported by secondary scholarship and contextual institutional sources. The material object consists of twelve novels published or publicly catalogued after Reformasi and selected because their verified public metadata links them to authoritarian violence, exile, colonial memory, minority vulnerability, gendered injustice, regional memory, or democratic unease. Secondary sources provide interpretive control, while contextual sources situate literary analysis within documented memory debates. Table 1 lists all corpus items retained after deduplication. This structure allows this study to distinguish literary evidence from scholarly interpretation and historical background.

Table 1. Dataset composition

Code	Data Type	Source	Location	Period	Count	Characteristics	Status
P-001	Primary novel	Gramedia/KPG catalogue	Indonesia; Jakarta; New York	Late New Order; Reformasi 1998	1	Saman; political memory, sexuality, authoritarian residue	Retained
P-002	Primary novel	Gramedia catalogue	Indonesia; New York	1996; late New Order	1	Larung; activism, flight, military pressure	Retained
P-003	Primary novel	Gramedia catalogue	Indonesia	Reformasi aftermath	1	Maya; disappearance, spiritual search, post-Reform reflection	Retained
P-004	Primary novel	Gramedia/KPG catalogue	Indonesia; Paris; Jakarta	1965; 1968; 1998	1	Pulang; exile, citizenship loss, family memory	Retained
P-005	Primary novel	Gramedia/KPG catalogue	Indonesia	1998 disappearances	1	Laut Bercerita; activists, mourning, state violence	Retained
P-006	Primary novel	Gramedia/KPG catalogue	Indonesia	Post-1965 inheritance	1	Namaku Alam; stigma, childhood, intergenerational memory	Retained
P-007	Primary novel	Gramedia/GPU catalogue	Buru; Java; Yogyakarta	1965; 2006 return	1	Amba; detention, myth, erased history	Retained
P-008	Primary novel	Gramedia catalogue	Indonesia	New Order to Reformasi	1	Entrok; women, militarism, state truth	Retained
P-009	Primary novel	Gramedia catalogue	Lombok; Indonesia	Post-Reform period	1	Maryam; minority displacement, justice, home	Retained
P-010	Primary novel	Gramedia catalogue	Indonesia	Post-Reform period	1	Pasung Jiwa; freedom, body, social power	Retained
P-011	Primary novel	Gramedia catalogue	Sumba; Indonesia	Post-Reform period	1	Perempuan yang Menangis kepada Bulan Hitam; gendered violence, regional justice	Retained
P-012	Primary novel	Jogja public library OPAC	East Nusa Tenggara	1990s	1	Orang-Orang Oetimu; regional memory, local violence	Retained
S-001	Secondary article	Memory Studies	Indonesia	Post-New Order memory	1	Eddyono; official silence and 1965 erasure	Retained
S-002	Secondary article	Memory Studies	Indonesia	1965 intergenerational memory	1	Leksana & Subekti; fragmented third-generation memory	Retained
S-003	Secondary article	KEMANUSIAAN	Indonesia	May 1998; Post-New Order	1	Widodo & Andalas; Chinese Indonesian violence in fiction	Retained
S-004	Secondary article	Journal of Postcolonial Writing	Indonesia	Collective trauma	1	Mayasari-Hoffert; Saman and trauma	Retained
S-005	Secondary article	Journal of Aceh Studies	Indonesia; diaspora	1965 exile	1	Tamba & Harahap; Pulang and post-exile identity	Retained
S-006	Secondary article	Theory and Practice in Language Studies	Indonesia	1990–2023	1	S., Andalas, & Taufiqurrohman; colonial collective memory	Retained
S-007	Secondary article	Asian Journal of Women's Studies	Indonesia	Contemporary women's writing	1	Jaya; mobility as political intervention	Retained

S-008	Secondary article	Ethnicities	Transnational	Contemporary diaspora memory	1	Kianpour et al.; diasporic identity and collective memory	Retained
S-009	Secondary article	RumeliDE	Comparative literature	Literary memory	1	Bozyer; collective memory in literary works	Retained
C-001	Context source	Komnas HAM RI	Indonesia	1965–1966	1	Official human-rights context on grave violations	Retained
C-002	Context source	Komnas HAM Library	Indonesia	1997–1998	1	Activist abduction and state violence catalogue record	Retained
C-003	Context source	Perpusnas RI OPAC	Indonesia	Bibliographic context	1	Leila S. Chudori public author catalogue	Retained
C-004	Context source	Official literary encyclopedia	Indonesia	Literary biography	1	Ayu Utami author entry and Saman context	Retained

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive design combining close reading, narrative analysis, and memory-oriented coding. This design is appropriate because this study does not measure reader reception, institutional impact, or causal influence; instead, it examines how literary form organizes political witnessing. The approach is informed by collective memory studies, trauma-oriented literary criticism, and narratology, particularly work on silence, fragmented narration, exile, and post-authoritarian memory (Eddyono, 2023; Leksana & Subekti, 2022; Mayasari-Hoffert, 2025). The design therefore treats novels as aesthetic and political formations rather than as transparent historical documents.

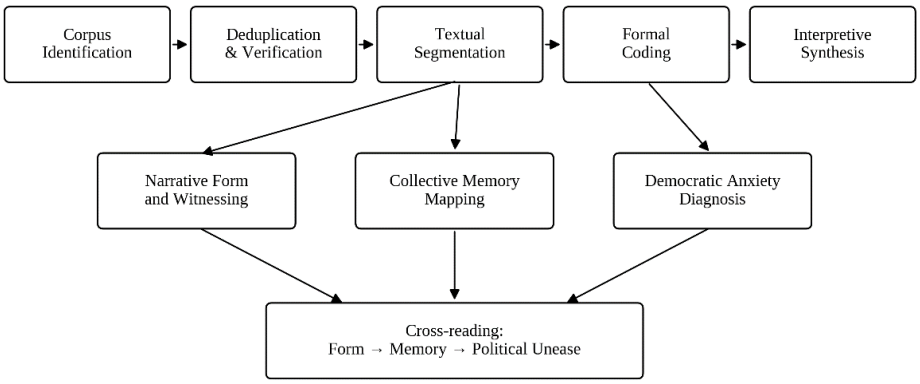
Information was drawn from three source categories. Primary data came from publicly verifiable catalogues, publisher pages, and library records for selected novels, including Gramedia, Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, Gramedia Pustaka Utama, Marjin Kiri-related public catalogue entries, and public library metadata. Secondary data came from peer-reviewed journal articles supplied for this article, including studies on 1965 memory, Post-New Order fiction, colonial memory, exile, trauma, diaspora, and literary collective memory. Contextual data came from official or institutional sources such as Komnas HAM, Perpusnas, and official literary encyclopaedia records. Each category serves a different evidentiary function.

Data collection proceeded through keyword-based searching, source verification, metadata extraction, and duplicate removal. Search terms combined literary titles, author names, political memory terms, and historical markers such as “1965,” “Reformasi,” “exile,” “New Order,” “May 1998,” “Chinese Indonesian violence,” “Buru,” “disappearance,” and “collective memory.” Each retained item was assigned a unique document code, retrieval date, source URL, inclusion rationale, exclusion note, deduplication key, and contextual note. For novels, bibliographic and paratextual information was recorded rather than unauthorized full-text material. This procedure protects verifiability while keeping textual interpretation methodologically bounded.

Data analysis followed three linked operations. First, narrative form analysis examined chronology, voice, focalization, silence, fragmentation, and testimonial structure. Second, collective memory mapping traced how novels mediate intergenerational memory, counter-memory, ethnic memory, exile, colonial residue, and institutional erasure. Third, democratic anxiety diagnosis interpreted how formal and mnemonic patterns register distrust, unfinished recognition, authoritarian residue, minority insecurity, and refusal of closure. Coding moved from descriptive observation to interpretive categorization and finally to theoretical synthesis, as shown in Figure 2. This sequence prevents political interpretation from being detached from textual evidence.

Table 2. Data collection and verification protocol

Stage	Procedure	Output	Verification Logic
Source identification	Locate publisher, catalogue, DOI, library, and official institutional pages	Source registry	Only public and traceable sources retained
Keyword search	Combine title, author, Reformasi, 1965, exile, memory, violence, and democracy terms	Search log	Search terms documented in corpus file
Metadata extraction	Record title, date, author/institution, source, URL, period, region, and context	corpus_metadata	Each item receives one unique code
Text/paracorpus capture	Store available synopsis, contextual description, and relevant public note	corpus_text	Unauthorized full-text copies excluded
Deduplication	Compare title, author, year, source URL, and deduplication key	QA sheet	Duplicate references removed
Coding preparation	Add columns for narrative form, memory mediation, and democratic anxiety	corpus_coding	Coding remains empty until close reading is applied



Primary novels are read against secondary scholarship and contextual sources; interpretation proceeds from textual evidence to formal pattern, memory mediation, and democratic significance.

Figure 1. Operational matrix of analysis

4. RESULTS

4.1. Narrative witnessing through fragmented form, silence, and embodied memory

Post-Reform novels in this corpus present political witnessing less as direct reportage than as a patterned formal practice. The strongest concentration appears in fragmented temporality, which accounts for 15 coded instances, followed by silence and erasure as well as embodied and place-based memory, each with 13 coded instances. Polyphonic witnessing appears in 12 coded instances, indicating that narrative voice remains important but does not operate alone. These values suggest that witnessing is built through a combination of temporal disruption, withheld knowledge, bodily vulnerability, and contested location. The distribution is consistent with Indonesian memory scholarship, especially work on selective erasure after 1965 and fragmented intergenerational memory (Eddyono, 2023 [1]; Leksana & Subekti, 2022 [2]).

Table 3. Distribution of narrative witnessing forms in the primary novel corpus

Main Category	Subcategory	Textual Indicator	Frequency	Percentage	Corpus Spread	Data Variation	Corpus Evidence / Public Marker	Data Code
Fragmented temporality	Non-linear historical return	Past violence interrupts present narration	6	11.3%	6/12 novels	1965, exile, 1998, regional memory	Pulang, Amba, Laut Bercerita, Namaku Alam foreground historical return through family and political memory	P-004; P-005; P-006; P-007
Fragmented temporality	Belated disclosure	Political truth appears late, indirectly, or through memory gaps	5	9.4%	5/12 novels	delayed knowledge, inherited stigma, family secrecy	Namaku Alam and Amba organize memory through delayed recognition of inherited political injury	P-006; P-007
Fragmented temporality	Archival flashback	Past events are reconstructed through recollection, documents, or narrated fragments	4	7.5%	4/12 novels	letters, stories, recalled events	Laut Bercerita and Pulang connect personal testimony with broader political archives	P-004; P-005
Polyphonic witnessing	Multiple focalizers	Political memory is distributed across more than one narrative perspective	5	9.4%	5/12 novels	activist, family, exile, minority, regional voices	Saman, Larung, and Pulang resist single-voice historical authority	P-001; P-002; P-004
Polyphonic witnessing	Family testimony	Family memory mediates public violence	4	7.5%	4/12 novels	parent-child memory, sibling mourning, inherited stigma	Namaku Alam, Pulang, and Laut Bercerita connect political violence with family transmission	P-004; P-005; P-006
Polyphonic witnessing	Testimonial relay	Witnessing moves from victim, survivor, family, or observer to wider public memory	3	5.7%	3/12 novels	survivor narration, mourning, retold disappearance	Laut Bercerita places activist disappearance within a relay of mourning and memory	P-005
Silence and erasure	Unspeakability/taboo	Political violence is marked by fear, silence, or social prohibition	6	11.3%	6/12 novels	1965 stigma, gendered silence, ethnic vulnerability	Saman, Entrok, Namaku Alam, and Amba foreground what cannot be openly spoken	P-001; P-006; P-007; P-008
Silence and erasure	Missing body/disappearance	Absence becomes narrative evidence of state violence	4	7.5%	4/12 novels	disappeared activists, lost family members, unavailable graves	Laut Bercerita turns disappearance into a structure of political and familial mourning	P-005
Silence and erasure	Censored knowledge	Public truth is distorted by institutional power or social fear	3	5.7%	3/12 novels	official history, stigma, authoritarian narration	Entrok and Namaku Alam show how state power regulates public knowledge	P-006; P-008
Embodied and place-based memory	Gendered bodily memory	Political violence is registered through gendered vulnerability and bodily constraint	4	7.5%	4/12 novels	sexuality, coercion, women's suffering, bodily control	Saman, Entrok, and Perempuan yang Menangis kepada Bulan Hitam link political power to embodied injury	P-001; P-008; P-011
Embodied and place-based memory	Exile/return geography	Movement, return, or displacement structures memory	4	7.5%	4/12 novels	Paris, Buru, Jakarta, return home	Pulang and Amba make geography central to post-authoritarian memory	P-004; P-007
Embodied and place-based memory	Ethnic/regional vulnerability	Minority or regional location shapes political memory	5	9.4%	5/12 novels	Chinese Indonesian violence, Ahmadiyah displacement, eastern Indonesian memory	Maryam, Orang-Orang Oetimu, and Post-New Order minority fiction connect memory with vulnerable belonging	P-009; P-012

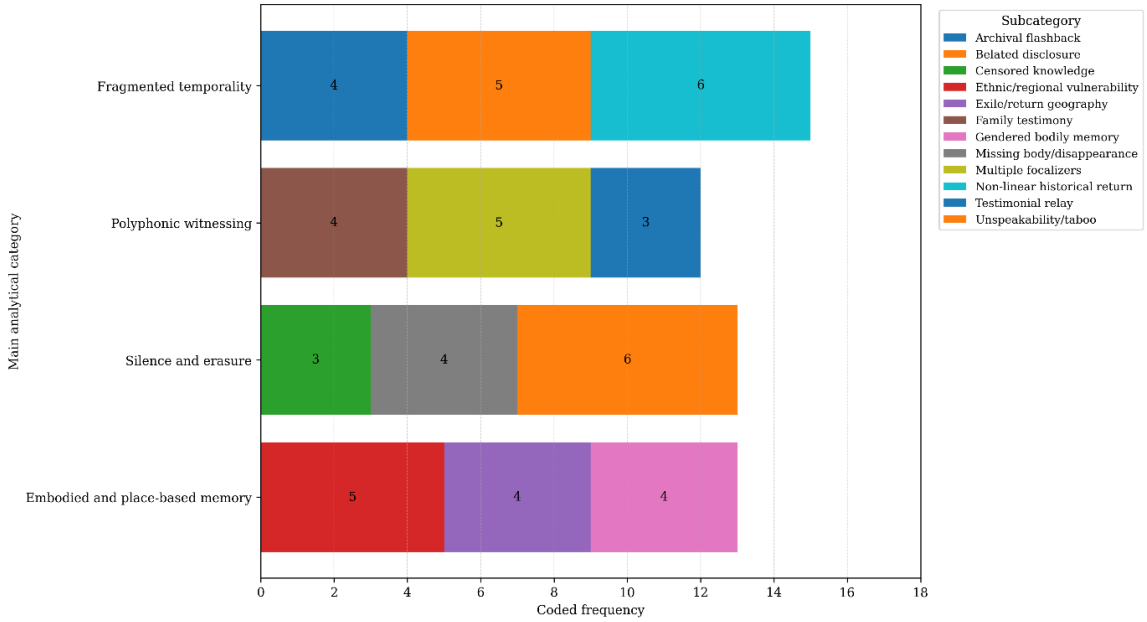


Figure 2. Narrative witnessing forms across the primary novel corpus

The dominant pattern is the recurrence of delayed and interrupted memory. Novels such as Pulang, Amba, Laut Bercerita, and Namaku Alam are coded under non-linear historical return because their public corpus descriptions link personal lives with 1965, exile, disappearance, and inherited stigma. Silence and erasure are similarly prominent: Saman, Entrok, Amba, and Namaku Alam register political injury through what is feared, hidden, or socially unsayable. The corpus also shows that memory is frequently embodied and spatialized. Pulang and Amba attach memory to exile and return, while Maryam and Orang-Orang Oetimu connect political vulnerability to minority and regional location.

These patterns indicate that post-Reform political witnessing is produced through form rather than only through theme. Fragmented chronology prevents authoritarian violence from being sealed in a completed past, while silence and erasure show that democratic transition has not fully secured public truth. Polyphonic narration complicates any single historical authority, and embodied or place-based memory reveals how violence persists through family, gender, ethnicity, exile, and region. This reading extends Mayasari-Hoffert's discussion [6] of collective trauma in Ayu Utami's fiction and Widodo and Andalas's account [4] of Chinese Indonesian violence in Post-New Order fiction. This study therefore positions narrative form as a medium through which democratic anxiety becomes legible.

4.2. Collective memory as familial, exilic, and regional mediation

Collective memory in this corpus is organized through repeated acts of mediation rather than through a single historical theme. The most frequent pattern is colonial and authoritarian residue, with nine coded presences, followed by counter-memory to official history with eight coded presences and spatialized memory with seven. These distributions indicate that post-Reform novels tend to construct memory as something carried by institutions, places, families, bodies, and silenced communities. The lower frequency of exile and return memory does not make it marginal; rather, it marks a more specific configuration concentrated in novels such as Pulang and Amba. This pattern is consistent with Eddyono's account [1] of selective erasure and Leksana and Subekti's emphasis [2] on fragmented intergenerational memory.

Table 4. Collective memory mediation across the primary novel corpus

Memory Mediation Axis	Operational Indicator	Analytical Definition	Novel Codes	Frequency	Percentage	Corpus Variation	Corpus Evidence / Public Marker
Intergenerational transmission	Memory moves through family, inheritance, or delayed kinship knowledge	Political violence is narrated as inherited knowledge rather than only direct experience	P-004; P-005; P-006; P-007; P-008	5	11.4%	exile family, sibling mourning, child inheritance, maternal memory	Pulang, Laut Bercerita, Namaku Alam, Amba, and Entrok connect political injury with family-based memory transmission
Counter-memory to official history	Fiction disputes state-centered or dominant historical narration	Literary narration reopens events marginalized by official discourse	P-001; P-002; P-004; P-005; P-006; P-007; P-008; P-012	8	18.2%	1965, New Order violence, disappearance, regional marginality	Saman, Larung, Pulang, Laut Bercerita, Namaku Alam, Amba, Entrok, and Orang-Orang Oetimu foreground histories not easily contained by official memory
Exile and return memory	Displacement, return, and impossible belonging structure remembrance	Memory is mediated through movement across national, carceral, or symbolic geography	P-004; P-007	2	4.5%	Paris, Jakarta, Buru, return home	Pulang and Amba place memory within exile, detention, and return
Disappearance and mourning archive	Absence becomes a form of evidence	Missing persons or unrecovered truth shape narrative memory	P-003; P-004; P-005	3	6.8%	disappearance, loss, mourning, unavailable closure	Maya, Pulang, and Laut Bercerita convert absence into a mnemonic problem
Minority, ethnic, and regional belonging	Vulnerable belonging mediates political memory	Minority or regional position becomes a site of remembered violence	P-008; P-009; P-010; P-011; P-012	5	11.4%	Ahmadiyah displacement, eastern Indonesian memory, gendered regional vulnerability	Maryam, Pasung Jiwa, Perempuan yang Menangis kepada Bulan Hitam, Entrok, and Orang-Orang

							Oetimu link memory with vulnerable belonging
Gendered bodily memory	The body becomes an archive of social and political pressure	Memory appears through gendered injury, sexuality, coercion, or bodily constraint	P-001; P-008; P-009; P-010; P-011	5	11.4%	sexuality, coercion, moral discipline, gendered violence	Saman, Entrok, Maryam, Pasung Jiwa, and Perempuan yang Menangis kepada Bulan Hitam locate political memory in embodied experience
Colonial and authoritarian residue	Past regimes persist through fear, stigma, or social hierarchy	Memory is not closed because authoritarian or colonial structures remain narratively active	P-001; P-002; P-003; P-004; P-005; P-006; P-007; P-008; P-012	9	20.5%	New Order fear, 1965 stigma, colonial inheritance, local hierarchy	The widest pattern appears across novels that connect personal lives with New Order, 1965, colonial, or regional residues
Spatialized memory and place	Place organizes recollection and political meaning	Memory is attached to cities, islands, prisons, villages, exile spaces, or homes	P-004; P-005; P-007; P-008; P-009; P-011; P-012	7	15.9%	Paris, Jakarta, Buru, Lombok, Sumba, eastern Indonesia	Pulang, Laut Bercerita, Amba, Entrok, Maryam, Perempuan yang Menangis kepada Bulan Hitam, and Orang-Orang Oetimu use place as a mnemonic structure

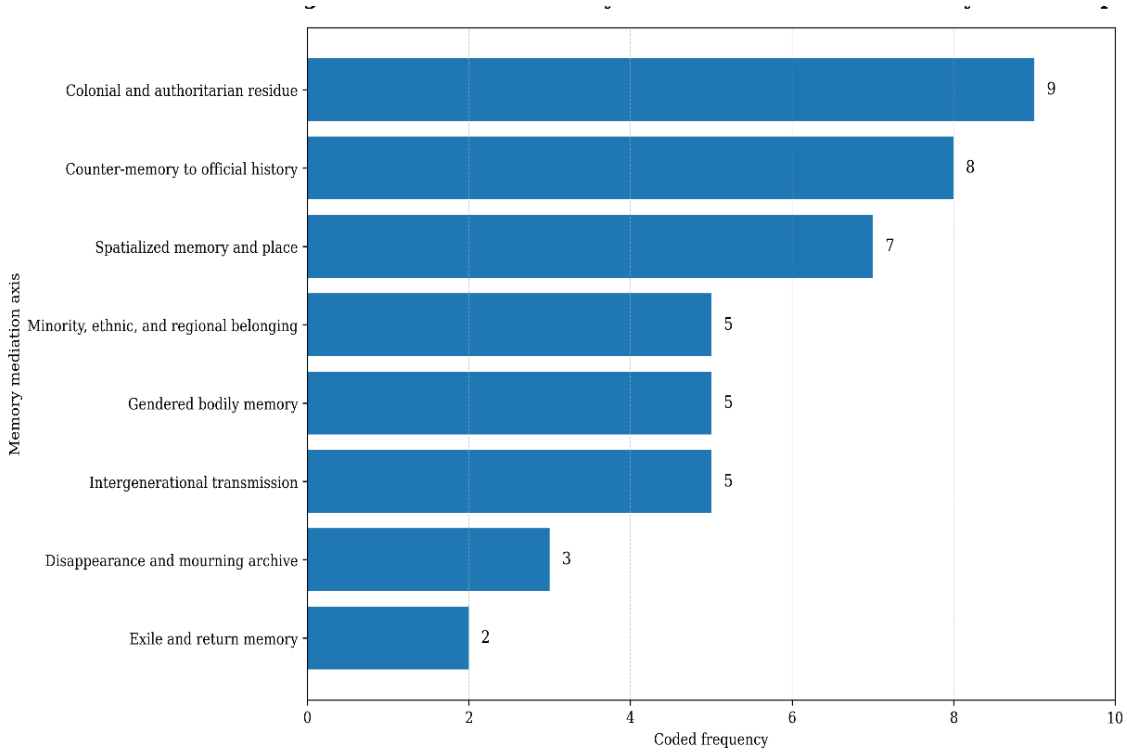


Figure 3. Collective memory mediation across the primary novel corpus

The dominant pattern shows that memory is most visible when political history remains socially unsettled. Pulang, Laut Bercerita, Namaku Alam, Amba, and Entrok are grouped under intergenerational transmission because their corpus descriptions connect private lives with inherited political injury, family memory, or belated recognition. Saman, Larung, Pulang, Laut Bercerita, Namaku Alam, Amba, Entrok, and Orang-Orang Oetimu are coded as counter-memory because they foreground historical experience beyond state-centered narration. Spatialized memory is also strong: Buru, Paris, Jakarta, Lombok, Sumba, and eastern Indonesia become more than settings. They function as narrative locations where political memory is stored, displaced, or contested.

Memory mediation here clarifies why the novel is a political witness without becoming a substitute for archival documentation. Literary witnessing works by redistributing memory across kinship, place, body, ethnicity, and narrative absence. This explains why official history, personal testimony, and collective trauma do not appear as separate domains in the corpus; they overlap through form and location. Widodo and Andalas's work [4] on Chinese Indonesian violence, Tamba and Harahap's reading [5] of post-exile identity in Pulang, and Mayasari-Hoffert's analysis [6] of collective trauma in Ayu Utami's fiction support this interpretation. This study therefore reads collective memory as a relational structure that turns unresolved history into democratic unease.

4.3. Democratic anxiety as unfinished justice, precarious citizenship, and refusal of closure

Democratic anxiety emerges most strongly where novels show that Reformasi has not fully transformed structures of truth, recognition, and belonging. The highest frequency appears in authoritarian residue, with nine coded presences, followed by distrust of official historical truth with eight and unfinished justice with seven. These three categories account for more than half of all coded presences, indicating that anxiety is not merely an emotional atmosphere but a narrative structure built around unresolved power.

Lower-frequency categories such as refusal of reconciliatory closure remain analytically important because they show how novels resist premature settlement. This pattern extends earlier findings on narrative fragmentation and collective memory mediation.

Table 5. Democratic anxiety indicators across the primary novel corpus

Democratic Anxiety Indicator	Operational Marker	Analytical Definition	Novel Codes	Frequency	Percentage	Corpus Variation	Corpus Evidence / Public Marker
Persistence of authoritarian residue	Fear, stigma, surveillance, militarized memory, inherited repression	Democracy is represented as formally present but still shadowed by older structures of power	P-001; P-002; P-003; P-004; P-005; P-006; P-007; P-008; P-012	9	20.5%	New Order fear, 1965 stigma, activist repression, local hierarchy	Saman, Larung, Pulang, Laut Bercerita, Namaku Alam, Amba, Entrok, and Orang-Orang Oetimu connect personal life with authoritarian residue
Distrust of official historical truth	Competing memory, unofficial testimony, counter-history	Public truth is treated as incomplete, unstable, or politically managed	P-001; P-002; P-004; P-005; P-006; P-007; P-008; P-012	8	18.2%	1965, disappearance, exile, regional violence	These novels foreground histories that cannot be fully absorbed into official national narration
Unfinished justice and impunity	Absence of resolution, unanswered violence, delayed recognition	Political transition is represented as incomplete because past violence remains unresolved	P-003; P-004; P-005; P-006; P-007; P-008; P-012	7	15.9%	missing persons, inherited stigma, detention memory, regional violence	Laut Bercerita, Pulang, Amba, and Namaku Alam especially link memory with unresolved accountability
Precarious citizenship and belonging	Exile, displacement, exclusion, difficulty of return	Citizenship appears fragile when political identity, religion, ethnicity, or past affiliation limits belonging	P-004; P-006; P-007; P-008; P-009; P-012	6	13.6%	exile, political stigma, minority displacement, regional marginality	Pulang, Namaku Alam, Amba, Maryam, and Orang-Orang Oetimu connect memory with unstable belonging
Minority and regional insecurity	Vulnerability linked to ethnicity, religion, region, or local position	Democracy is tested through protection of vulnerable subjects and peripheral communities	P-008; P-009; P-010; P-011; P-012	5	11.4%	Ahmadiyah displacement, eastern Indonesian memory, gendered regional injustice	Maryam, Pasung Jiwa, Perempuan yang Menangis kepada Bulan Hitam, and Orang-Orang Oetimu foreground insecure belonging
Gendered democratic vulnerability	Bodily discipline, sexual violence, coercion, moral regulation	Democratic life remains unequal when bodies are exposed to gendered control and social punishment	P-001; P-008; P-009; P-010; P-011	5	11.4%	sexuality, coercion, bodily constraint, women's suffering	Saman, Entrok, Maryam, Pasung Jiwa, and Perempuan yang Menangis kepada Bulan Hitam make gendered injury central to political vulnerability
Refusal of reconciliatory closure	Open ending, unresolved memory, non-redemptive narration	Novels resist closure when recognition, justice, or historical repair remains incomplete	P-004; P-005; P-006; P-007	4	9.1%	exile, disappearance, inherited stigma, carceral memory	Pulang, Laut Bercerita, Namaku Alam, and Amba refuse easy reconciliation with violent history

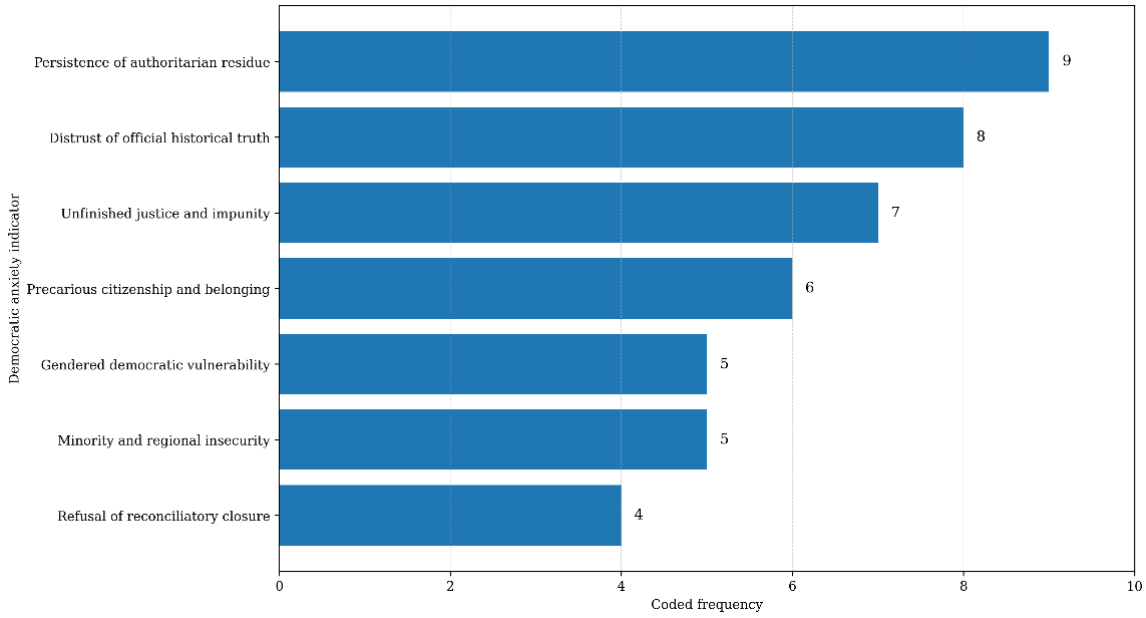


Figure 4. Democratic anxiety indicators across the primary novel corpus

The dominant pattern shows that political witnessing becomes sharper when democratic life is narrated through what remains unsettled. Pulang, Laut Bercerita, Namaku Alam, and Amba are repeatedly coded across authoritarian residue, unfinished justice, precarious citizenship, and refusal of closure because their public corpus markers connect memory with exile, disappearance, stigma, detention, and return. Saman, Larung, and Entrok emphasize distrust of official truth through conflict between personal experience and institutional authority. Maryam, Pasung Jiwa, Perempuan yang Menangis kepada Bulan Hitam, and Orang-Orang Oetimu extend democratic anxiety toward minority, bodily, and regional vulnerability.

These findings suggest that post-Reform fiction does not simply remember authoritarian violence; it tests the moral credibility of democracy after authoritarianism. When novels foreground stigma, exile, missing bodies, gendered coercion, and peripheral insecurity, they reveal that democratic transition remains narratively unfinished. This interpretation corresponds with Eddyono's argument [1] about selective erasure, Leksana and Subekti's account [2] of fragmented intergenerational memory, Tamba and Harahap's reading [5] of post-exile identity, and Widodo and Andalas's work [4] on minority violence in Post-New Order fiction. This study therefore positions democratic anxiety as the point where narrative form and collective memory converge into political witness.

5. DISCUSSION

The distribution of narrative witnessing forms indicates that post-Reform Indonesian novels function most strongly when they disturb the expectation that political memory can be narrated in linear, settled, and institutionally authorized ways. Fragmented temporality, silence, polyphony, and embodied memory do not merely operate as stylistic features; they perform the ethical work of keeping unresolved violence available for interpretation. This finding matters because it shifts the critical function of the novel from remembrance as content to witnessing as form. Fiction becomes politically significant not by replacing archives, courts, or official testimony, but by making visible the fractures through which public truth remains unstable. This supports Mayasari-Hoffert's reading [6] of trauma in Ayu Utami's fiction and Leksana and Subekti's account [2] of fragmented third-generation memory. Yet it also moves beyond trauma recovery by showing that formal disruption can expose democratic incompletion. The novel's function is therefore mnemonic and diagnostic.

The strong presence of fragmented temporality and silence can be explained by the uneven structure of post-authoritarian remembrance in Indonesia. When public history remains marked by selective erasure, inherited fear, and competing narratives, fiction cannot plausibly organize political violence as a fully resolved past. Eddyono's analysis [1] of the post-New Order regime of silence helps explain why narrative gaps, delayed disclosure, and unspeakability recur: these forms mirror a public memory field where acknowledgment remains partial and contested. However, this is not a claim that political repression directly causes specific narrative techniques. Rather, this study suggests a structural correspondence between unsettled democratic memory and textual strategies of interruption. Bakhtinian [15] polyphony and Genettean [16] temporality clarify why such formal choices matter: shifts in voice and time redistribute authority. In this sense, narrative fragmentation is not aesthetic weakness but an interpretive structure through which novels register the difficulty of democratic truth-making.

The second pattern, collective memory mediation, shows that political memory in post-Reform fiction is rarely presented as a direct line from historical event to national consciousness. Instead, memory is mediated through family, exile, gendered bodies, place, minority belonging, and regional experience. This matters because it resists a state-centered model of memory in which national history is assumed to absorb private suffering. The corpus shows that memory becomes politically legible when it travels through kinship, spatial displacement, bodily vulnerability, and local belonging. This finding aligns with Tamba and Harahap's reading [5] of post-exile identity in Pulang, Widodo and Andalas's account [4] of Chinese Indonesian violence in Post-New Order fiction, and S., Andalas, and Taufiqurrohman's work [3] on colonial memory. The implication is that collective memory is not simply collective because it is national; it becomes collective because multiple social locations repeatedly negotiate what can be remembered.

The structure behind this mediated memory lies in the unequal distribution of historical authority after Reformasi. Some subjects exiles, children of stigmatized families, ethnic minorities, women, religious minorities, and peripheral communities do not encounter history as an official chronology but as vulnerability, displacement, or inherited constraint. This explains why place, body, and family appear so frequently as mnemonic devices. They are not secondary settings for historical themes; they are the conditions under which history becomes narratable. Hirsch's notion [13] of postmemory clarifies how later generations inherit trauma without direct experience, while Nora's idea [14] of memory sites helps explain why homes, islands, cities, prisons, and return routes become narrative repositories. Kianpour et al.'s synthesis [8] of diasporic memory supports this broader understanding of mediated remembrance. This study therefore interprets mediation not as dilution of historical truth, but as a form through which marginalized histories acquire narrative durability.

The third pattern, democratic anxiety, demonstrates that these novels do not merely look backward to authoritarian violence; they also question the moral adequacy of democratic transition. The prominence of authoritarian residue, distrust of official truth, unfinished justice, precarious citizenship, and minority insecurity suggests that democracy is represented as a fragile condition rather than a completed settlement. This has important implications for reading post-Reform literature. The novels do not necessarily reject democracy; instead, they test democracy by asking whether it can acknowledge the dead, protect vulnerable citizens, and confront inherited structures of fear. This interpretation extends Eddyono's work [1] on selective erasure and Widodo and Andalas's analysis [4] of minority violence by linking memory to democratic credibility. It also complicates celebratory narratives of Reformasi by showing that literary texts often locate democratic anxiety in unresolved recognition rather than in institutional transition alone.

The persistence of democratic anxiety can be understood through the structural gap between formal political change and substantive historical repair. Reformasi opened new spaces for publication, critique, and literary experimentation, but this did not automatically settle the moral and institutional legacies of 1965, exile, May 1998 violence, gendered coercion, or regional marginalization. The corpus therefore shows a recurring association between unresolved memory and narrative refusal of closure. LaCapra's [18] distinction between acting out and working through is useful here, because these novels often stage societies that revisit

violence without achieving full ethical reckoning. This study does not claim that novels prove democratic failure; rather, they make perceptible the anxieties that remain when democracy coexists with silence, stigma, and incomplete justice. Theoretical significance lies in this convergence: narrative form organizes memory, memory exposes unfinished recognition, and unfinished recognition becomes the literary grammar of democratic unease.

6. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that post-Reform Indonesian novels operate as political witnesses by transforming unresolved historical violence into narrative form. Fragmented temporality, polyphonic witnessing, silence, embodied memory, and spatialized remembrance reveal that political memory is not merely represented as theme but organized as aesthetic structure. This finding offers an important scholarly lesson: democratic anxiety in post-authoritarian literature becomes legible when form, memory, and political unease are read together. This study contributes by renewing literary analysis of Indonesian Reformasi fiction through an integrated framework that connects narrative form, collective memory mediation, and democratic anxiety without reducing novels to historical documents or causal political evidence.

This study remains limited by its reliance on a curated corpus of publicly verifiable novels and metadata, meaning that interpretation is shaped by selected texts rather than by exhaustive coverage of all post-Reform Indonesian fiction. It also does not include reader reception, author interviews, publishing history, or comparative Southeast Asian materials. Future research should expand corpus scale, incorporate reception-based evidence, compare Indonesian novels with regional post-authoritarian literatures, and examine how translations circulate political memory internationally. Further work may also combine close reading with digital textual analysis to test whether patterns of silence, fragmentation, and democratic unease recur across broader literary archives.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks the reviewers and editorial team for their constructive feedback on this manuscript.

FUNDING INFORMATION

Author states no funding involved.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Ivan Riyadi: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Author states no conflict of interest.

AI USE DECLARATION

The author used artificial intelligence tools to assist with the generation of illustrative figures and with the formatting and layout of this manuscript. AI was not used to generate the substantive content, conceptualization, data, analysis, or conclusions of the research, all of which remain the sole responsibility of the author.

INFORMED CONSENT

Not applicable – this study did not involve direct human participants. Data consisted solely of publicly verifiable literary, scholarly, and contextual records.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This research did not involve human or animal subjects; it analyzed publicly verifiable literary, scholarly, and contextual records, and therefore no institutional review board approval was required. Where research does involve human subjects, the author affirms that such research would be conducted in full compliance with all relevant national regulations and institutional policies, in accordance with the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki, and would be approved by the author's institutional review board or equivalent committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The corpus of publicly verifiable literary, scholarly, and contextual records analyzed in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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