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Populism in popular literature: the political rhetoric of the 'people' in Indonesian bestseller novels

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ABSTRACT

Background: The convergence of populist discourse and popular culture in post-Reformasi Indonesia positions bestselling novels as key sites for political meaning-making. **Objective:** This study examines how Indonesian bestseller novels construct "the people," oppose elites, and normalize populist logic. **Method:** A qualitative approach integrates Critical Discourse Analysis, narrative analysis, and populist rhetoric. **Results:** Novels portray "the people" as morally virtuous against corrupt elites, using polarized discourse, emotional narratives, and simplified rhetoric to legitimize populist views. **Implication:** These findings show that popular literature functions as a cultural infrastructure shaping everyday political imagination. **Novelty:** This study provides an integrative framework linking discourse, narrative, and populist rhetoric to reveal how literary texts normalize populism beyond formal politics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, Indonesia has witnessed a marked intensification of populist discourse across political, media, and cultural domains, coinciding with the rapid expansion of its popular publishing industry. Indonesia consistently ranks among the largest book markets in Southeast Asia, with annual sales exceeding 300 million copies and bestseller novels regularly reaching print runs above 100,000 copies per title. Popular novels such as *Laskar Pelangi* and *Negeri 5 Menara* have not only achieved commercial success but also penetrated educational curricula, film adaptations, and national cultural narratives. This widespread circulation positions popular fiction as a powerful medium for shaping political imagination beyond formal political arenas. At the same time, post-Reformasi Indonesia has experienced recurring populist mobilizations framed around moralized distinctions between "the people" and "the elite," evident in electoral campaigns, religious movements, and media rhetoric. Despite this convergence, the role of popular literature in articulating and normalizing populist rhetoric remains underexamined. This study addresses this gap by treating bestselling novels as socially consequential texts that participate in contemporary political meaning-making.

Existing scholarship on populism has predominantly focused on political speeches, party manifestos, media discourse, and social media communication, emphasizing populism as a thin-centered ideology characterized by moral binaries and antagonistic constructions of society. Parallel literary studies have examined popular fiction in Indonesia through lenses of education, nationalism, moral didacticism, and postcolonial identity [1], [2], [3], [4]. While scholars have explored ideology and power in canonical or "serious" literature [5], [6], [7], popular bestseller novels are often dismissed as apolitical, sentimental, or merely pedagogical. A growing body of cultural studies, however, argues that popular narratives are central

to the everyday reproduction of political ideology [8], [9], [10]. Yet, few studies systematically analyze how populist rhetoric operates at the level of narrative structure, metaphor, and dialogic representation within popular fiction, particularly in non-Western contexts. The intersection between populism and popular literature thus remains theoretically fragmented and empirically thin. This research intervenes by integrating populism studies with literary discourse analysis, positioning Indonesian bestseller novels as a critical but overlooked archive of populist political rhetoric.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine how Indonesian bestselling novels construct and disseminate populist representations of "the people" and their antagonistic others. The central research questions guiding this inquiry are: how is "the people" linguistically and narratively articulated in popular Indonesian fiction? How are moral oppositions between ordinary citizens and elites discursively produced through narrative conflict and characterization? And what rhetorical strategies are employed to legitimize claims of collective suffering, moral superiority, and popular justice? By focusing on purposively selected narrative excerpts and dialogues, this study treats populism not merely as a political ideology but as a cultural rhetoric embedded in storytelling practices. Through a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis, narrative analysis, and populist rhetorical analysis, this research interrogates how literary language performs political work within seemingly non-political texts.

This study advances the argument that popular Indonesian novels function as cultural infrastructures of populism, translating abstract political antagonisms into emotionally resonant narrative forms. It hypothesizes that these texts normalize populist logic by moralizing social inequality, personalizing structural injustice, and positioning protagonists as symbolic embodiments of "the people." Rather than offering complex political critique, popular fiction tends to simplify systemic conflicts into accessible moral dramas, thereby enhancing their affective appeal and ideological persuasiveness. The findings are expected to demonstrate that populism in literature operates less through explicit political messaging than through narrative alignment, emotional identification, and symbolic victory. By foregrounding popular literature as a site of political discourse, this research contributes to broader debates on cultural populism, literary ideology, and the politics of representation in the Global South, while expanding the methodological scope of populism studies beyond institutional political texts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Populism

Scholarly debates on populism converge on the idea that it operates less as a coherent ideology than as a flexible discursive logic. Seminal theorists conceptualize populism as a moralized worldview that divides society into two antagonistic camps: a virtuous people and a corrupt elite. While some political scientists frame populism as a "thin-centered ideology" [2], [3], [11] discourse-oriented scholars emphasize its performative and rhetorical dimensions [4], [12], [13]. This divergence has significant implications for cultural analysis, as populism may circulate beyond institutional politics through narratives, symbols, and affect. Recent interdisciplinary studies increasingly highlight populism's adaptability across media, suggesting that cultural texts—rather than political programs—often provide its most persuasive expressions.

Building on these perspectives, scholars have identified recurring discursive features that structure populist meaning-making. These include moral binaries, appeals to collective identity, emotionalization of social grievances, and personalization of structural inequality. Linguistic studies emphasize evaluative language, pronoun use, and metaphor as key indicators [13], while narrative-oriented research foregrounds plot simplification and antagonistic characterization [6]. Importantly, populism is often sustained through affective strategies that foster identification with "ordinary people" [10]. Such indicators enable analysts to trace populist rhetoric even in texts that do not explicitly reference politics. Consequently, populism becomes legible as a cultural grammar embedded within storytelling practices, not merely as an overt political doctrine.

2.2. Popular literature

Parallel to populism studies, literary scholarship has increasingly examined popular literature as a site of ideological production. Once marginalized as commercially driven or aesthetically inferior, popular fiction is now understood as a crucial arena where social values and political imaginaries are negotiated. Cultural theorists argue that bestseller novels play a mediating role between elite discourse and everyday experience, translating abstract social tensions into accessible narrative forms [5], [8]. However, definitions of popular literature vary, ranging from market-based criteria [5], [6] to reader reception and narrative conventions [7], [9]. These differences shape how scholars assess the political significance of popular texts, particularly in postcolonial and Global South contexts.

Analytical frameworks for studying popular fiction commonly focus on narrative structure, characterization, and thematic repetition [8]. Research shows that popular novels frequently rely on linear plots, moral clarity, and emotionally resonant protagonists, allowing readers to identify with collective

struggles. Such features make popular fiction especially effective in communicating ideological messages subtly and persuasively. Studies in narrative theory further suggest that simplification is not a weakness but a functional strategy that enhances circulation and impact [14], [15], [16]. When examined through this lens, popular literature emerges as a powerful medium for reproducing dominant discourses, including those related to social justice, morality, and collective identity.

2.3. Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis has provided a methodological bridge between linguistic theory and cultural criticism, enabling scholars to examine how power and ideology are embedded in textual practices. Rooted in the work of discourse theorists, this approach views language as constitutive of social reality rather than a neutral reflection of it [3], [4]. In literary studies, discourse analysis has been used to uncover ideological positioning in narrative voice, dialogue, and metaphor. Nevertheless, applications of discourse analysis to popular fiction remain relatively limited, particularly in relation to populist rhetoric. Most existing studies prioritize political or media texts [8], [9], leaving literary narratives underexplored.

Within discourse-oriented literary analysis, several analytical dimensions have proven especially relevant [6], [10]. These include representations of social actors, evaluative language, narrative framing of conflict, and the articulation of moral legitimacy. When combined with rhetorical analysis, these dimensions allow researchers to identify how texts construct symbolic boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. Recent interdisciplinary work suggests that integrating discourse analysis with narrative theory offers a robust framework for examining cultural populism. Such an approach enables a nuanced understanding of how popular fiction participates in political meaning-making while maintaining its aesthetic and narrative autonomy.

3. METHOD

This study adopts popular Indonesian bestseller novels as its primary unit of analysis, treating full novels as the material object and selected narrative excerpts as analytical data. The corpus consists of three widely circulated novels that have achieved both commercial success and cultural influence, ensuring their relevance for examining populist discourse in popular literature. These texts were selected because they foreground representations of ordinary people, moral struggle, and antagonism toward elites. Table 1 presents this research corpus in detail, including publication data and analytical relevance. By focusing on complete novels rather than isolated passages, this study preserves narrative coherence while enabling systematic extraction of populist discourse embedded in narrative and dialogic forms.

Table 1. Research corpus of Indonesian bestseller novels

No	Novel Title	Author	Year	Publisher	Popular Status	Analytical Relevance
1	*Negeri 5 Menara*	Ahmad Fuadi	2009	Gramedia	Bestseller, film adaptation	Collective struggle, moral discipline, popular aspiration
2	*Laskar Pelangi*	Andrea Hirata	2005	Bentang Pustaka	Bestseller, national curriculum	Moralization of poverty, rakyat as virtuous subjects
3	*Orang-Orang Biasa*	Andrea Hirata	2019	Bentang Pustaka	Bestseller	Grassroots resistance to economic elites

This research employs a qualitative interpretive design grounded in discourse-oriented literary analysis. This design is appropriate because this study seeks to examine how populist meanings are constructed through language, narrative structure, and symbolism rather than to measure textual frequency statistically. Qualitative design allows for close engagement with textual nuance, ideological positioning, and affective strategies embedded in popular fiction. This study integrates insights from cultural studies, literary theory, and political discourse analysis, positioning literature as a socially active form of communication [17], [18]. Such an approach is widely endorsed in recent interdisciplinary research that treats literary texts as discursive practices shaping political imagination.

Data collection was conducted through purposive textual sampling. Relevant narrative passages and dialogues were identified based on predefined criteria: explicit or implicit references to “the people,” moral evaluations of social actors, representations of collective suffering, and antagonistic depictions of elites. The novels were read iteratively, with passages coded manually to preserve contextual meaning. Excerpts were then compiled into an analytical corpus, accompanied by contextual notes on narrative position and character

function. This procedure follows best practices in qualitative discourse studies, which emphasize transparency, replicability, and theoretical alignment in data selection [19].

Data analysis proceeded in several interrelated stages. First, critical discourse analysis was applied to identify ideological positioning, evaluative language, and power relations embedded in narrative and dialogue. Second, narrative analysis examined plot structure, character alignment, and moral resolution patterns. Third, populist rhetorical analysis identified strategies such as moral binaries, emotional appeals, and symbolic representation of "the people." These methods were applied iteratively rather than sequentially, allowing analytical categories to inform one another. This integrated approach enables a nuanced understanding of how populist rhetoric operates across linguistic, narrative, and symbolic levels within popular fiction.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Discursive construction of 'the people' and the elite

To systematically capture how "the people" and "the elite" are discursively constructed in Indonesian bestseller novels, this study first maps the distribution of populist lexical markers across the selected corpus. Based on close reading and purposive coding, a frequency-based table was constructed to visualize recurring lexical categories related to popular identity, elite antagonism, and moral evaluation. Such tabulation is commonly used in discourse-oriented literary studies to provide empirical grounding for qualitative interpretation. Table 2 aggregates narrative and dialogic excerpts from *Negeri 5 Menara*, *Laskar Pelangi*, and *Orang-Orang Biasa*, highlighting repeated references to collective subjects (e.g., rakyat, orang kecil), elite figures (e.g., pejabat, orang kaya), and moral predicates. This approach aligns with recent discourse-analytic scholarship that combines qualitative interpretation with descriptive textual mapping to enhance analytical transparency.

Table 2 reveals a clear asymmetry in lexical and evaluative patterns across the corpus. References to "the people" are overwhelmingly associated with positive moral attributes such as honesty, perseverance, sincerity, and solidarity, accounting for approximately two-thirds of evaluative descriptors identified in the excerpts. In contrast, elite figures are predominantly framed through negative moral qualifiers, including corruption, greed, detachment, and moral decay. Across the three novels, antagonistic pairings—such as rakyat versus pejabat or orang kecil versus orang kaya—appear consistently in moments of narrative conflict. Notably, *Orang-Orang Biasa* shows the highest density of explicit elite antagonism, while *Laskar Pelangi* emphasizes moralized poverty and collective endurance. These patterns suggest that populist binaries are not incidental but structurally embedded within popular narrative language.

These discursive patterns indicate that Indonesian popular fiction reproduces a populist worldview through moral polarization rather than explicit political argumentation. The consistent alignment of "the people" with virtue and "the elite" with moral failure reflects a discursive logic in which social inequality is framed as ethical betrayal rather than structural complexity. Such simplification resonates with theories of populism that emphasize moral antagonism as its core rhetorical mechanism [2], [20]. In literary form, this logic is reinforced by narrative voice and character focalization, which guide reader sympathy toward collective popular subjects. The novels thus function as affective discursive spaces where populist meanings are naturalized and emotionally legitimized. This finding supports the argument that popular literature participates actively in shaping political imagination by embedding populist discourse within culturally familiar narrative conventions [21], [22], [23].

4.2. Narrative patterns of collective struggle and moral victory

To examine how populist meanings are narratively organized, this sub-section visualizes recurrent plot structures and character alignments across the selected novels. Drawing on narrative theory and prior studies of popular fiction, a structural mapping in Table 3 was constructed to identify dominant narrative sequences related to collective struggle and moral resolution. This visualization synthesizes key narrative stages—initial deprivation, collective mobilization, confrontation with elite power, and symbolic victory—across *Negeri 5 Menara*, *Laskar Pelangi*, and *Orang-Orang Biasa*. Such structural tabulation is commonly employed in narrative analysis to demonstrate pattern regularity across texts. By foregrounding narrative trajectories rather than isolated episodes, Table 3 provides an empirical foundation for understanding how popular novels encode populist logic through story progression.

Table 2. Discursive construction of "the people" and "the elite" in Indonesian bestseller novels

No	Novel	Discursive Category	Lexical / Symbolic Markers	Narrative Position	Moral Evaluation	Frequency (n)	Discursive Function	Populist Indicator
1	*Negeri 5 Menara*	The People	rakyat, santri, kami, orang kecil	Protagonist collective	Positive (discipline, sincerity, solidarity)	47	Legitimation of moral authority	Collective virtue
		The Elite	pejabat, penguasa, orang berkuasa	Background / antagonist	Negative (detachment, arrogance)	18	Construction of moral distance	Elite alienation
		People vs Elite	kami vs mereka	Dialogic confrontation	Polarized (good vs bad)	12	Moral boundary making	Binary antagonism
2	*Laskar Pelangi*	The People	orang miskin, anak kampung, rakyat kecil	Protagonist group	Positive (perseverance, innocence)	63	Moralization of poverty	Virtuous suffering
		The Elite	penguasa sekolah, pejabat	Institutional authority	Negative (indifference, injustice)	21	Attribution of structural failure	Moral blame
		Identity	kami, kita, bersama	Narratorial emphasis	Positive (unity, loyalty)	34	Emotional alignment with readers	Affective collectivism
3	*Orang-Orang Biasa*	The People	orang biasa, warga, masyarakat kecil	Central protagonists	Positive (honesty, resilience)	71	Representation of popular legitimacy	Moral superiority
		The Elite	orang kaya, pemilik modal, elite ekonomi	Explicit antagonist	Strongly negative (greed, exploitation)	45	Personification of inequality	Elite antagonism
		Moral Judgment	adil vs tidak adil	Narrative resolution	Polarized moral framing	28	Simplification of social conflict	Moral absolutism
		Action	perlawanan kecil, keadilan rakyat	Plot climax	Positive (symbolic victory)	19	Normalization of populist justice	Popular justice

Table 3. Narrative patterns of collective struggle and moral victory in Indonesian bestseller novels

Narrative Dimension	Analytical Indicator	*Negeri 5 Menara* (Fuadi)	*Laskar Pelangi* (Hirata)	*Orang-Orang Biasa* (Hirata)	Cross-Novel Pattern	Populist Narrative Function
Macro-Plot Sequence	Hardship to Solidarity to Confrontation to Symbolic victory	Present (high)	Present (very high)	Present (very high)	Convergent linear arc	Converts inequality into morally legible drama
Stage 1: Initial Deprivation	Opening conditions of lack (poverty, marginality, limited access)	Moderate (n=10 scenes)	Very high (n=18 scenes)	High (n=14 scenes)	Hardship is front-loaded	Establishes "the people" as suffering collective
	Causal framing of hardship (structural vs personal)	Mixed (self-discipline + structure)	Mostly structural (institutional neglect)	Structural personalized (elite as cause)	Structure is personified	Simplifies complex systems into antagonistic causes
Stage 2: Collective Formation	Group-based protagonist formation (ensemble over individual)	Strong (pondok cohort)	Strong (school community)	Strong (citizen group)	Collective protagonist dominates	Produces "people-as-one" narrative unity
	Pronoun ecology and collectivizing cues (we/our/together)	High (n=22 cues)	Very high (n=31 cues)	High (n=26 cues)	Collective voice recurrent	Builds affective identification and inclusion
Stage 3: Moral Education / Ethical Consolidation	Struggle framed as moral training (discipline, sincerity, perseverance)	Very high (n=20 episodes)	High (n=15 episodes)	Moderate (n=9 episodes)	Moralization is persistent	Grounds legitimacy in virtue rather than policy
	Didactic or aphoristic narration (maxims, lessons)	High	Very high	Moderate	Present in all	Normalizes populist morality as "common sense"
Stage 4: Antagonistic Encounter	Antagonist type (institutional vs personal elite figure)	Institutional authority (moderate)	Institutional authority (high)	Explicit elite economic figures (very high)	Elite becomes more explicit in OB	Enables moral binary and blame assignment
	Conflict staging (policy/system to personalized antagonist)	Moderate	High	Very high	Personalization trend	Makes injustice emotionally actionable
Stage 5: Collective Mobilization	Cooperative action scenes (planning, mutual aid, joint risk)	High (n=14 scenes)	High (n=12 scenes)	Very high (n=20 scenes)	Mobilization peaks mid-plot	Turns grievance into collective agency
	Risk distribution (shared sacrifice rather than lone hero)	Strong	Strong	Strong	Sacrifice collectivized	Reinforces "ordinary people" as moral majority

Stage 6: Crisis / Climax	Crisis as moral test (betrayal, humiliation, defeat threat)	Moderate	High	Very high	Crisis precedes closure	Amplifies moral stakes over structural stakes
	Emotional intensifiers (shame, rage, compassion, hope)	High	Very high	Very high	Affect is central	Populism works through emotional legitimacy
Stage 7: Moral Victory (Closure)	Victory type (symbolic vs material)	Symbolic (education/aspiration)	Symbolic (recognition/achievement)	Symbolic + pragmatic (justice event)	Symbolic victory dominates	Provides catharsis; validates people's virtue
	Justice modality (ethical vindication vs institutional reform)	Ethical vindication	Ethical vindication	Ethical vindication (limited reform)	Reform is minimal	Depoliticizes complexity while affirming moral order
Character Alignment	Focalization: reader alignment with people	High	Very high	Very high	Strong alignment	Produces "felt" legitimacy of the people
	Elite characterization depth (complex vs caricatured)	Mixed	Mixed	Often flattened (antagonistic)	Elites often simplified	Sustains binary clarity required by populist logic
Narrative Devices	Humor/irony as social critique	Moderate	Moderate	High	Present but variable	Softens critique while maintaining antagonism
	Repetition of hardship motifs (scarcity, exclusion, humiliation)	Moderate	Very high	High	Motifs recur	Stabilizes collective suffering as core identity
	Redemption trope (people endure → deserve victory)	High	Very high	Very high	Shared closure logic	Converts endurance into moral entitlement
Spatial Politics	Margin vs center (village/school/pondok vs city/authority)	Moderate	High	High	Binary spaces	Spatializes inequality for easy cognition
Overall Pattern Index	Convergence score (0–5)*	4.1	4.6	4.7	High convergence	Suggests genre-level populist narrativity

** Convergence score is an interpretive index summarizing the presence and intensity of the shared narrative arc and its populist functions across stages (0 = absent; 5 = dominant).*

Table 4. Rhetorical strategies of populism in Indonesian popular fiction

No	Rhetorical Device	Linguistic / Narrative Form	Example Markers (Indicative)	Frequency (n)*	Dominant Affect	Targeted Subject	Populist Function	Discursive Outcome
1	Moral Binary	Evaluative adjectives; contrastive clauses	jujur vs korup, adil vs zalim	42	Moral certainty	People vs elite	Simplification of social conflict	Ethical polarization
2	Emotional Intensification	Lexicon of suffering and endurance	menderita, tertindas, bertahan	55	Empathy, compassion	People	Affective legitimation	Emotional alignment
3	Collective Pronoun	Inclusive pronouns in narration/dialogue	kami, kita, bersama	38	Belonging	People	Construction of collective identity	In-group cohesion
4	Victimhood Metaphor	Bodily and spatial metaphors	diinjak, terpinggirkan	27	Sympathy, indignation	People	Moral elevation through suffering	Legitimation of grievance
5	Elite Delegitimization	Moral labeling; caricature	serakah, tak bermoral	33	Anger	Elite	Ethical disqualification	Symbolic exclusion
6	Narrative Personalization	Structural issues embodied in characters	pejabat lalai, orang kaya rakus	29	Resentment	Elite figures	Personification of inequality	Antagonistic clarity
7	Aphoristic Statements	Didactic maxims, moral lessons	“kejujuran akan menang”	21	Hope	People	Moral naturalization	Common-sense populism
8	Repetition	Recurrent motifs and phrases	kemiskinan, perjuangan	31	Emotional reinforcement	People	Discursive stabilization	Ideological persistence
9	Humor and Irony	Satirical tone, narrative irony	elite ditertawakan	18	Ridicule	Elite	Soft delegitimization	Reduced authority
10	Symbolic Justice Trope	Non-institutional moral closure	kemenangan kecil, keadilan rakyat	24	Satisfaction	People	Validation of moral order	Cathartic closure
11	Spatial Polarization	Binary settings	kampung vs kota	19	Alienation	People/Elite	Spatialization of inequality	Cognitive simplification
12	Temporal Compression	Fast resolution of conflict	akhir bahagia cepat	16	Relief	People	Narrative inevitability	Moral determinism
13	Appeals to Hope	Lexicon of aspiration	harapan, mimpi, masa depan	34	Optimism	People	Forward-looking legitimacy	Moral futurity
14	Silence on Policy Detail	Absence of technical explanation	—	Systematic	Trust	Reader	Depoliticization	Ideological smoothing
15	Narratorial Alignment	Empathic focalization	narrator pro-rakyat	100% presence	Trust	People	Discursive endorsement	Normalization of populism

Table 3 demonstrates a striking convergence in narrative patterns across the corpus. All three novels follow a linear progression from collective hardship toward moral vindication, with minor variations in setting and character composition. In *Laskar Pelangi*, prolonged communal suffering rooted in poverty and institutional neglect dominates the early narrative, while collective perseverance culminates in symbolic educational achievement. *Negeri 5 Menara* emphasizes disciplined communal aspiration, framing struggle as moral self-cultivation shared by a collective protagonist group. *Orang-Orang Biasa* presents the most explicit confrontation, depicting ordinary citizens organizing against economic elites, leading to a morally justified resolution. Across the corpus, individual heroism is consistently subordinated to collective agency, and narrative closure privileges moral victory over structural transformation.

These recurring narrative configurations suggest that popular Indonesian fiction operationalizes populism through storytelling rather than explicit ideological argument. By structuring plots around collective endurance and symbolic triumph, the novels translate abstract social inequality into emotionally legible moral dramas. This narrative simplification aligns with populist logic, which privileges moral clarity and collective identity over institutional complexity [10], [24]. The absence of sustained systemic critique does not weaken the populist effect; rather, it enhances reader identification by framing justice as ethically inevitable. Narrative resolution thus functions as ideological closure, reaffirming the moral superiority of "the people" while neutralizing structural ambiguity. This finding supports the view that popular narratives play a crucial role in naturalizing populist worldviews by embedding them within familiar and satisfying story arcs.

4.3. Rhetorical strategies of populism in popular fiction

To identify how populist meanings are rhetorically activated at the micro-textual level, this sub-section visualizes dominant rhetorical strategies employed across the selected novels. Drawing on populism studies and rhetorical discourse analysis, a multi-dimensional data in Table 4 was constructed to map emotional appeals, moral binaries, metaphorical framings, and linguistic simplification strategies. The visualization synthesizes coded excerpts from *Negeri 5 Menara*, *Laskar Pelangi*, and *Orang-Orang Biasa*, enabling comparison of rhetorical intensity and functional variation. Such visualization practices are increasingly used in cultural populism research to bridge qualitative close reading with systematic pattern identification. By foregrounding rhetorical mechanisms rather than thematic content alone, Table 4 provides an empirical basis for explaining how popular fiction renders populist discourse affectively persuasive.

Table 4 reveals a consistent reliance on emotional and moral rhetoric across the corpus. Emotional intensifiers—such as lexical items expressing suffering, hope, humiliation, and endurance—appear with high frequency, particularly in *Laskar Pelangi* and *Orang-Orang Biasa*. Moral binaries are articulated through evaluative adjectives and contrastive clauses that frame ordinary people as inherently virtuous and elites as morally compromised. Metaphorical language further reinforces this divide, frequently mobilizing spatial and bodily metaphors to depict inequality as lived experience rather than abstract condition. Linguistic simplification, including repetition and aphoristic statements, enhances accessibility and mnemonic impact. Collectively, these strategies function to stabilize populist meaning while maintaining narrative readability and emotional resonance for mass readership.

These rhetorical strategies suggest that populism in popular fiction operates primarily through affective alignment rather than explicit ideological instruction. By privileging emotional immediacy, moral clarity, and metaphorical concreteness, the novels lower interpretive barriers and invite readers to internalize populist logic intuitively. This rhetorical configuration aligns with theories of cultural populism that emphasize persuasion through sentiment and identification rather than policy discourse [5], [9], [25]. Importantly, the normalization of populist rhetoric in literary form renders it culturally legitimate and politically inconspicuous. Popular fiction thus becomes a site where populist worldviews are rehearsed, reinforced, and circulated under the guise of entertainment. This finding underscores the role of narrative rhetoric in extending populist discourse beyond formal political communication into everyday cultural consumption.

5. DISCUSSION

The discursive polarization between "the people" and "the elite" observed in popular Indonesian novels carries significant cultural and political implications. By consistently moralizing social relations, these texts function to render inequality intelligible through ethical binaries rather than institutional analysis. This narrative strategy performs an integrative function for readers by offering moral clarity and emotional reassurance, particularly in contexts marked by social precarity. However, such simplification also entails a disfunction: it risks naturalizing antagonism while obscuring the structural complexity of power relations.

Cultural texts that repeatedly frame injustice as moral betrayal may inadvertently reinforce distrust toward institutions without fostering critical understanding of systemic change. In this sense, popular fiction becomes a double-edged medium—simultaneously democratizing political sentiment and limiting the scope of political imagination [2], [26]. The findings thus suggest that literary populism operates as a culturally resonant but ideologically constraining mode of meaning-making.

The persistence of this moralized discourse can be traced to deeper structural conditions shaping both literary production and reception. Indonesian popular fiction emerges within a media ecosystem where accessibility, emotional resonance, and market circulation are prioritized. Under such conditions, moral binaries offer a narratively efficient means of engaging broad readerships while aligning with prevailing populist sentiments in public discourse. The personalization of elites as antagonistic figures reflects broader socio-political patterns in which abstract systems are difficult to contest, but identifiable moral enemies are narratively manageable. Moreover, the legacy of post-authoritarian distrust toward power institutions amplifies the appeal of people-centered moral narratives [20], [21]. These underlying structures explain why populist discourse is not merely reflected in literature but actively reproduced through it, embedded within genre conventions and reader expectations rather than imposed externally.

Narrative patterns of collective struggle and symbolic victory further illuminate the cultural work performed by popular fiction. By foregrounding communal endurance and moral triumph, these novels reaffirm collective identity as a source of legitimacy and hope. This narrative configuration fulfills an affective function, offering readers a sense of justice and closure even when material conditions remain unchanged. Yet the emphasis on symbolic rather than structural resolution introduces a narrative disfunction: systemic inequality is acknowledged but ultimately displaced by moral catharsis. Such storytelling reassures readers that virtue is rewarded, thereby stabilizing social meaning without demanding political transformation [10], [24]. The implication is not that popular fiction lacks critical potential, but that its critique is often redirected toward ethical affirmation rather than institutional accountability. This pattern highlights the subtle ideological role of narrative closure in sustaining populist imaginaries.

The recurrence of this narrative arc is closely tied to genre conventions and the socio-cultural positioning of popular literature. Bestseller novels rely on linear progression, recognizable conflict, and emotionally satisfying endings to sustain reader engagement. Collective protagonists and moral victories align with communal values and postcolonial narratives of resilience, making them culturally legible and commercially viable. At a deeper level, these patterns reflect a structural tension between lived experiences of inequality and limited avenues for collective political agency. When institutional reform appears distant or abstract, narrative imagination compensates by staging justice within the story world. The prevalence of moral victory thus correlates with broader structural constraints on political participation [10], [27], revealing how narrative form adapts to socio-political realities rather than simply representing them.

Rhetorical strategies such as emotional intensification, metaphorical framing, and linguistic simplification further extend the populist reach of popular fiction. These devices enhance affective identification, enabling readers to experience political meanings viscerally rather than analytically. This rhetorical configuration serves a functional role in broadening access to political discourse, particularly among audiences distant from formal political communication. At the same time, the reliance on affect introduces a disfunction by privileging sentiment over deliberation. When populist rhetoric is normalized through entertainment, it becomes culturally legitimate yet politically inconspicuous. The result is a mode of persuasion that operates below the threshold of explicit ideology, shaping attitudes through familiarity and emotional alignment rather than argumentation [5], [9]. Popular fiction thus emerges as a key site where populist rhetoric is rehearsed and internalized.

The dominance of affective rhetoric can be understood through the underlying structures of media consumption and contemporary cultural politics. In an attention-driven environment, emotionally charged narratives outperform abstract critique, encouraging writers and publishers to favor rhetorical immediacy. Moreover, populism's reliance on affect resonates with broader shifts toward personalized and experiential forms of political engagement. Literary rhetoric mirrors these shifts by embedding political meaning within everyday emotions such as hope, anger, and empathy. This correlation suggests that the populist rhetoric found in popular fiction is not incidental but structurally aligned with the affective economy of contemporary culture [25], [28], [29]. Consequently, literature does not merely reflect populist discourse; it participates in its circulation and stabilization. Recognizing this role invites a reconsideration of popular literature as a central, rather than peripheral, actor in political meaning-making.

6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Indonesian bestselling novels function as influential cultural sites for the circulation of populist discourse, particularly through the moralized construction of "the people," antagonistic representations of elites, and rhetorically charged narratives of collective struggle. The key insight of this research lies in revealing how populism operates not only as a political ideology but as a narrative and

rhetorical logic embedded in popular literature. Methodologically, the integration of critical discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and populist rhetorical analysis advances literary-populism studies by bridging textual interpretation with systematic pattern mapping. Conceptually, this study renews perspectives on popular fiction by positioning it as an active agent in political meaning-making rather than a passive reflection of social reality, thereby expanding the analytical scope of both literary studies and cultural populism research.

Despite these contributions, this study is subject to certain limitations. The corpus is restricted to three Indonesian bestseller novels, which constrains the generalizability of findings across genres, periods, and readerships. Additionally, the qualitative design prioritizes depth over breadth and does not capture reader reception or the material circulation of texts. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating larger and more diverse corpora, comparative cross-national analyses, or mixed-method approaches combining textual analysis with audience studies. Further inquiry into digital popular narratives and transmedia adaptations would also enrich understanding of how populist discourse evolves across contemporary cultural platforms.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Rika Yani: conceptualization (lead), literary discourse analysis (lead), writing – original draft (lead), writing – review and editing (lead).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the authors' institutional review board or equivalent committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Data availability is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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