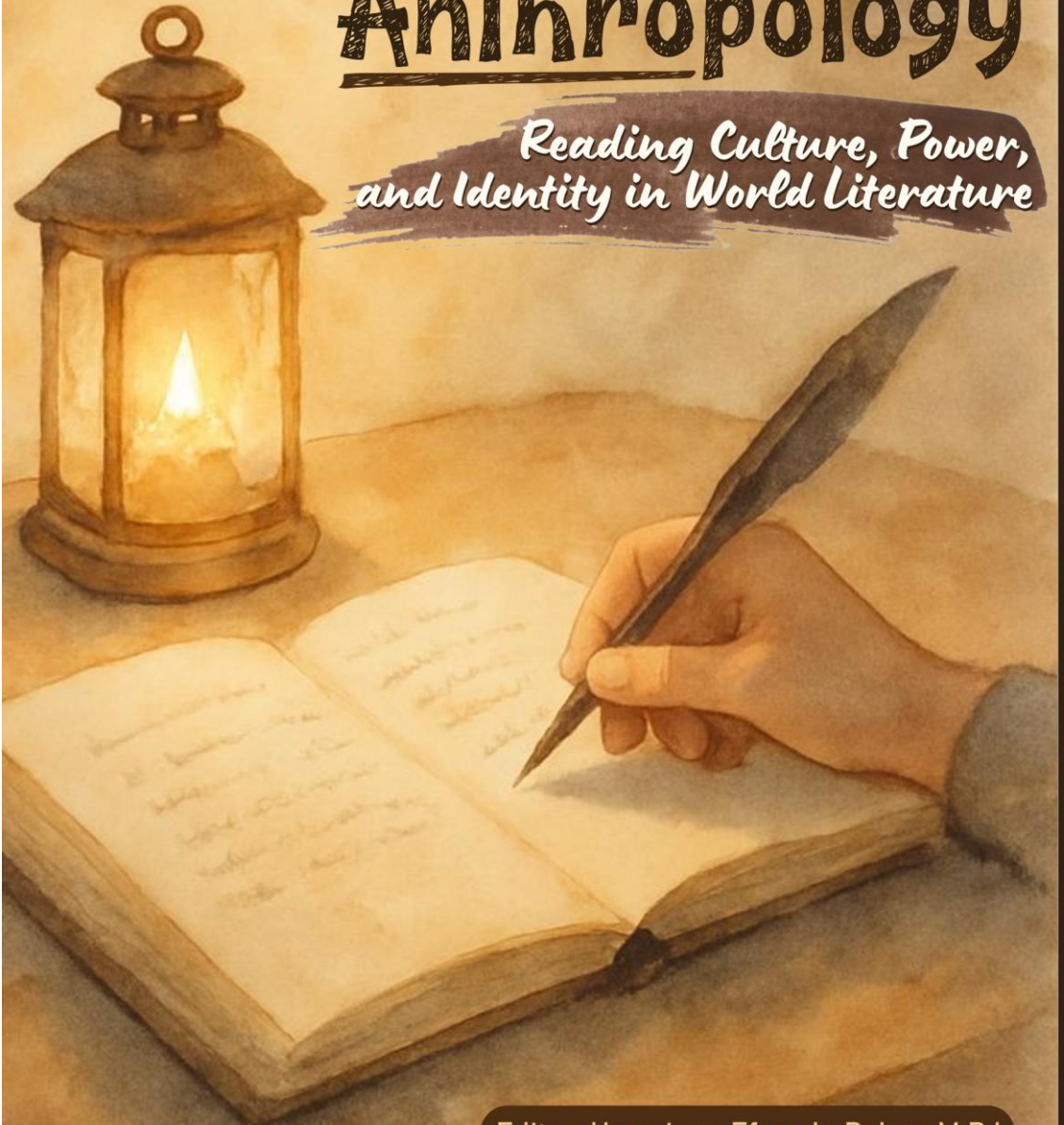


Prof. Dr. Mister Gidion Maru, M.Hum
Sabrina Wardatul Jannah Husain, S.Pd., M.A
Muhammad Ilham Ali, SS., M.Pd



Literary Anthropology

*Reading Culture, Power,
and Identity in World Literature*



Editor: Herminus Efrando Pabur, M.Pd

LITERARY ANTHROPOLOGY: READING CULTURE, POWER, AND IDENTITY IN WORLD LITERATURE

Prof. Dr. Mister Gidion Maru, M.Hum
Sabrina Wardatul Jannah Husain, S.Pd., M.A
Muhammad Ilham Ali S.S., M.Pd



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LITERARY ANTHROPOLOGY: READING CULTURE, POWER, AND IDENTITY IN WORLD LITERATURE

Authors:

Prof. Dr. Mister Gidion Maru, M.Hum
Sabrina Wardatul Jannah Husain, S.Pd., M.A
Muhammad Ilham Ali S.S., M.Pd

Cover Design:

Tahta Media

Editor:

Herminus Efrando Pabur, M.Pd

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Perumahan Mitra Utama Residence 3 Blok A no 1, Sawahan, Tempel,

Kec. Gatak, Kabupaten Sukoharjo, Jawa Tengah 57557

email: tahtaliterasimedia@gmail.com

website: <http://store.tahtamedia.co.id/>

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PREFACE

Foremost, we extend our profound gratitude to the Almighty God for His boundless grace, wisdom, and providence, which have granted us the strength and clarity to complete this book, *Literary Anthropology: Reading Culture, Power, and Identity in World Literature*. This book represents the culmination of a rigorous joint intellectual journey, delving into the profound ways human beings weave reality, negotiate power, and construct their identities through the timeless medium of storytelling.

The primary objective of this book is to dissolve the rigid methodological boundaries that have historically separated cultural anthropology from literary studies. By tracing the theoretical foundations of myth and ritual, dismantling the literacy bias in Western canons, and analyzing literature as both an arena of hegemonic power and a weapon for subaltern resistance, this work seeks to position texts, whether meticulously inscribed or orally transmitted as active ethnographic sites. Through the lenses of postcolonialism, ecocriticism, and diaspora studies, the chapters herein are designed to provide scholars, students, and researchers with a comprehensive interdisciplinary framework to read literature as a lived social reality.

The realization of this extensive manuscript would not have been possible without the invaluable support, guidance, and collaborative spirit of numerous individuals and institutions. We offer our deepest academic appreciation to our colleagues and institutional affiliations whose critical insights and continuous encouragement have significantly sharpened the arguments in this book. Special and profound recognition is owed to the custodians of oral traditions, the local maestros, and the indigenous communities whose living

memories and cultural resilience form the empirical bedrock of this study. Finally, our heartfelt thanks go to our respective families for their unwavering patience, understanding, and moral support throughout the demanding hours of collaborative research and writing.

We are acutely aware that despite our most earnest efforts, this academic endeavor is not without its limitations and shortcomings. The vastness of literary anthropology means that certain nuances may have been inadvertently overlooked. Therefore, we remain highly receptive to constructive criticisms, rigorous academic debates, and insightful feedback from readers and fellow scholars to improve and refine future iterations of this research.

It is our sincere hope that this book will serve as a meaningful contribution to the academic discourse in comparative literature, cultural anthropology, and environmental humanities, inspiring further explorations into the world's diverse and enduring literary landscapes.

Tondano, July 2026

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PART I

THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF LITERATURE AND HUMANITY



CHAPTER 1

THE INTERSECTION OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND LITERATURE

1.1 WHAT IS LITERARY ANTHROPOLOGY?

Imagine a night tens of thousands of years ago, when a group of early humans gathered around a campfire at the mouth of a cave. Outside, the darkness was fraught with the threats of predators and an inhospitable environment. Yet, within that circle of light, someone began to speak recounting a hunt that nearly claimed a life, the spirits inhabiting the mountains, or ancestors imparting messages through dreams. The others listened with captivated gazes, occasionally interrupting, laughing, or falling into a terrified silence. The cave walls of Chauvet, Lascaux, and Altamira, adorned with paintings of bison, horses, and human hands, serve as tangible evidence that long before the invention of writing, humans were driven by a primal urge to tell stories, to record experiences, and to transmit meaning. This instinct has never been extinguished. It has merely transitioned across mediums: from cave murals to oral verse, from oral verse to palm-leaf manuscripts, from manuscripts to printed books, and now to the glowing digital screens held in the palms of our hands. Jonathan Gottschall, in his influential work, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (2012), asserts that human beings are fundamentally "storytelling animals" a species that does not merely utilize stories as

supplementary entertainment, but rather one whose very existence is shaped, organized, and rendered meaningful through narrative. Gottschall demonstrates that even toddlers who cannot yet speak fluently eagerly ask for stories, and even the most rational adults remain captivated by novels, films, or neighborhood gossip, all of which are fundamentally narratives. This universal tendency serves as the foundational premise for the entirety of the discourse in this book: if storytelling is an innate human trait as natural as breathing or dreaming, then it is impossible to comprehend humanity in its entirety without understanding the stories they create, and conversely, it is equally impossible to fully comprehend a story without understanding the people and the culture that birthed it.

Upon closer observation, this phenomenon of storytelling is never random or arbitrary. Stories that endure across generations, whether the Nusantara folktale of the rebellious Malin Kundang, the Greek epic of the wandering Odysseus, or the shadow puppet epics of the Pandavas and Kauravas, always contain recurring patterns: moral conflict, sacrifice, betrayal, and redemption. This repetition of patterns is not a mere coincidence, but rather an indication that stories function as a kind of social simulation laboratory, a place where humans test various life scenarios without having to bear the actual risks. Gottschall indicates that the human brain, when exposed to narratives, processes information differently than when presented with statistical data or purely logical arguments; stories evoke empathy, activate mental simulations of others' experiences, and ultimately shape the moral values an individual upholds throughout their life. If this is the case, then every society, through the stories they preserve and pass down, is essentially teaching the next generation about what is considered right, what is deemed taboo, and how one should behave when faced with life's dilemmas. Stories, therefore, are not merely

leisurely entertainment, but mechanisms of cultural transmission that are far more effective and profound than mere verbal instructions or written laws alone.

From this universal standpoint, a much more specific and academic question arises: if literature is the mirror of the human soul and its culture, which academic discipline is most appropriate for interpreting it? For centuries, the answer to this question was divided into two distinct camps operating independently, with almost no intersection. On one side stood literary figures, literary critics, and philologists, who viewed the text as an aesthetic artifact an architecture of words that must be dissected through its style, narrative structure, metaphors, and formal beauty. On the other side stood anthropologists, who ventured into the field, living for months with remote tribes, documenting rituals, kinship systems, and subsistence patterns through rigorous, empirically-oriented participant observation. These two camps, despite both studying humanity, rarely engaged in dialogue.

Literary scholars considered anthropology too rigid and positivistic to capture the beauty of language; anthropologists considered literary studies too subjective and abstract to be deemed a science. Over time, however, a realization emerged that this gap was actually an artificial one an academic construct born from the division of faculties and Western scholarly traditions, rather than from the nature of the objects they studied. The humans who write stories and the humans who partake in rituals are the very same humans, living in the same culture, driven by the same existential anxieties. From this awareness, an interdisciplinary field of study emerged attempting to bridge these two worlds: Literary Anthropology an endeavor to read literary texts not merely as standalone aesthetic objects, but as cultural

documents rich with data on how humans think, feel, and organize their lives.

The terminology and conceptual framework of Literary Anthropology were formally introduced and systematized by Fernando Poyatos in his pioneering work, *Literary Anthropology: A New Interdisciplinary Approach to People, Signs and Literature* (1988). Poyatos proposed an approach consciously situated at the crossroads of the social sciences and the humanities, with the explicit goal of treating literary works as data sources regarding human behavior, including nonverbal behaviors such as gestures, physical proximity, vocal intonation, and other cultural signs that conventional literary criticism, which focuses too heavily on words on paper, frequently overlooks. For Poyatos, a novelist writing a conversational scene is actually recording whether consciously or unconsciously a mini-ethnography of how people in a specific culture greet one another, suppress emotions, show respect, or express anger. This approach demands that the reader or researcher not stop at the question, "what is the symbolic meaning of this scene?" as is customary in literary criticism, but also ask, "what cultural data is contained within the way this character moves, speaks, and interacts with their peers?" In other words, Literary Anthropology can be conceptually defined as the systematic study of literary works that treats the text as a window into the sign systems, values, beliefs, and behavioral patterns of a society, borrowing theoretical frameworks and methods from cultural anthropology to dissect these elements more deeply than pure literary criticism is capable of doing. Poyatos' concept becomes easier to grasp when envisioned concretely. Take, for example, a scene in a classic Indonesian novel where a young character must bow their head and avoid direct eye contact when speaking to an elder. For conventional literary criticism, such a detail might merely be considered a minor

descriptive element that adds a realistic impression to the story's setting.

However, for a literary anthropologist following Poyatos' framework, such a minute detail is highly valuable ethnographic data: it reveals the age hierarchy system, the concept of respect, and the applicable body language within the society represented by the author, without the narrator needing a single sentence to explicitly explain the norm. Poyatos refers to these types of nonverbal signs as integral components of what he calls the "triple system" words (verbal), paralinguistic elements (tone, pauses, implied intonation in dialogue), and kinesics or body language (movement, distance, touch) all three of which must be read simultaneously to comprehend the cultural meaning in its entirety. This triple approach significantly broadens the scope of what is considered "data" in literary analysis, moving from mere word meanings and linguistic symbols to the entire texture of human experience recorded by the author, even if implicitly and subconsciously.

To more acutely understand what is meant by Literary Anthropology, we must first delineate the boundaries that separate it from pure literary criticism on one hand. Traditional literary criticism, particularly that rooted in formalist and structuralist traditions, tends to focus on the text as an autonomous entity a world of words whose beauty is judged by the mastery of diction, the neatness of the plot, the depth of characterization, and the effectiveness of figures of speech. The questions raised usually revolve around aesthetic aspects: is this metaphor original? Is the narrative structure coherent? Is the linguistic style beautiful and powerful? Such a focus is highly valuable for assessing the artistic quality of a work, but it tends to ignore or underestimate the socio-cultural context that birthed the text. A novel might be praised for the beauty of its prose without anyone

questioning why the female characters within it are always depicted as subservient to male authority, or why the wedding ceremony in the story follows a specific pattern that actually reflects the real kinship structures in the author's society. Literary Anthropology emerges to fill this void by asserting that aesthetic beauty and cultural depth are not mutually exclusive, but rather two layers of meaning that run parallel and are equally deserving of serious analysis.

As a further illustration, imagine two readers analyzing the same novel say, a work detailing the conflict between old traditions and modernity in a village. The first reader, utilizing the lens of pure literary criticism, will be interested in how the author builds dramatic tension, how they choose the narrative point of view, and how they employ specific symbols for instance, an old banyan tree being cut down to poetically represent shifting eras. Such an analysis is valid and valuable, but it stops at the level of textual structure. The second reader, utilizing the lens of Literary Anthropology, will ask different questions: what kind of kinship system is implied by the way characters address one another? What customary rituals are depicted, and to what extent is that depiction accurate, or is it rather a nostalgic idealization by the author? How does the generational conflict in the novel reflect the real social tensions being experienced by society at the time the novel was written? These two types of readings do not negate each other, but they yield different kinds of knowledge, one oriented towards aesthetic appreciation, the other oriented towards cultural understanding. Literary Anthropology does not intend to replace the first reading, but rather to add a second layer that has often been overlooked.

On the other hand, Literary Anthropology also needs to be strictly differentiated from pure anthropology, which is oriented towards empirical field observation. Classical anthropology, since the era of

Bronisław Malinowski and Franz Boas, built its scientific authority upon the ethnographic method: the researcher lives directly among the community being studied, recording actual behavior, interviewing informants, and compiling reports based on verifiable empirical data. Its objects of study are living human beings, rituals actually performed, and social institutions actively functioning in the real world. Literary works, conversely, are fictional worlds the product of the author's imagination which, literally, did not "actually happen." The character of Siti Nurbaya never actually lived in Padang; the Buendía family in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* never actually inhabited Macondo. Thus, a natural critical question arises: can data from this unreal world be considered equivalent to ethnographic data from genuine field observations? Literary Anthropology answers this question not by naively equating the degree of truth of the two, but by arguing that fiction, however fabricated, is still constructed by authors who live, breathe, and think within a real culture, so that indirectly, every detail they create, no matter how imaginative, remains constrained and shaped by the cultural vocabulary, value systems, and perspectives available to them. Fiction, therefore, is not empirical reality in the sense of classical anthropology, but it is a symbolic trace of the cultural reality that birthed it an "indirect data" which, if read with the proper methodological sensitivity, can reveal mental structures, collective anxieties, and societal value systems just as effectively, and sometimes even more richly, than purely factual field reports.

The understanding that fiction can function as valid cultural data did not emerge out of nowhere; it is the result of a long evolution of thought that altered how academics view the position of literature within cultural studies. In its early days, literature was often positioned as a "complementary product" of culture a sort of decoration or byproduct of an established civilization, akin to

decorative carvings on a pillar whose function is merely aesthetic, rather than structurally supportive. In this view, what was considered "true culture" were the kinship systems, economic structures, political institutions, and religious rituals that could be directly observed; literature was merely a passive reflection, a faint echo of that more substantial reality. This hierarchical view placed anthropology above and literature below, as if fictional texts lacked the equal epistemic authority to speak on cultural truths. However, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed a radical paradigm shift. Literature began to be viewed not as a complementary product, but as the "magnifying glass" of the culture itself an optical instrument actually capable of magnifying, sharpening, and clarifying cultural details that escape the observation of conventional methods. When an ethnographer notes that a particular society highly values family honor, the note is often an abstract and flat statement. Yet, when a novelist writes a scene where a father must choose between saving his child's life or maintaining his family's honor before his neighbors, the reader feels viscerally through the character's internal tension, through emotionally resonant dialogue how that abstract value truly lives and operates within human consciousness. Literature, in other words, is capable of capturing the affective dimensions and inner experiences of a culture that are often inaccessible through empirical observation methods alone.

To provide a more concrete illustration of this "magnifying glass" metaphor, let us compare two sources of information regarding colonial society in the Dutch East Indies in the early twentieth century: a colonial government census report and a novel written by an indigenous author during the same period. The census report will provide us with precise figures population size, ethnic composition, literacy rates, land ownership distribution. This data is essential and

irreplaceable for understanding the scale of social phenomena. However, these numbers are silent regarding the inner experiences of the human beings enduring that colonial structure: what it felt like to be a marginalized indigenous person in one's own land, the psychological complexity of a *priyayi* (Javanese aristocrat) trapped between loyalty to tradition and the temptations of Western modernity, or the sorrow of a woman forced to submit to a system of arranged marriage. Novels from that era, despite all their fictionality, are precisely capable of recording and revitalizing these dimensions of inner experience with a richness of detail unattainable by census statistics. This is where the power of the magnifying glass metaphor operates: literature does not replace quantitative data, but rather magnifies and sharpens segments of cultural reality which, due to their subtle, subjective, and affective nature, tend to slip through the nets of conventional observation methods.

This shift in perspective was further emphasized and even fundamentally challenged by developments within the discipline of anthropology itself, specifically through a movement pioneered by James Clifford and George E. Marcus in their influential anthology, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986). Clifford and Marcus, alongside several other contributors, launched a sharp critique against the claims of scientific objectivity long championed by classical ethnography. They demonstrated that ethnographic reports, no matter how grounded in genuine field observation, are ultimately texts narrative constructs compiled by researchers by selecting specific viewpoints, arranging particular narrative arcs, and employing certain rhetorical styles to convince readers of the authority and truth of their reports.

Consequently, the boundary long considered rigid between "objective scientific ethnography" and "subjective literary works"

turned out to be far more blurred and fluid than previously assumed. An anthropological report, on a certain level, is a written work utilizing narrative devices, metaphors, and persuasive strategies akin to a novel; while a novel, conversely, can contain a depth of cultural observation no less meticulous than scientific ethnography. This challenge from Clifford and Marcus opened a wide path for the legitimacy of Literary Anthropology as a serious field of study, because if ethnography itself could no longer claim to be entirely free from elements of "poetics" or the art of storytelling, then there was no strong epistemological reason to reject literary works as valid sources of cultural data, provided they are read with an appropriate and critical methodological framework.

The implications of Clifford and Marcus's challenge were actually far more revolutionary than a mere minor methodological footnote. Before the publication of *Writing Culture*, classical ethnography was typically written in a "God's eye" style a researcher seemingly standing outside the culture they observed, describing it objectively and neutrally, without any trace of subjectivity or personal interest influencing what they chose to record and what they ignored. Clifford and Marcus, along with the other contributors in the anthology, dismantled this illusion by showing that every ethnographer, when sitting down to write their field report, is essentially making hundreds of narrative decisions: which scene is worthy of opening the report to grab the reader's attention, which informants' voices will be quoted directly and which summarized, what metaphors are used to depict "the other" so it feels exotic yet remains comprehensible to Western readers. These decisions, consciously or not, are rhetorical and aesthetic traditionally considered the exclusive domain of literature.

By unmasking this guise of objectivity, Clifford and Marcus did not intend to demean the credibility of anthropology, but rather to invite greater epistemological honesty: acknowledging that

CHAPTER 2

THE NARRATIVES OF MYTH, RITUAL, AND COSMOLOGY

2.1 THE ANATOMY OF MYTH

When the word "myth" is uttered in everyday conversation, it is almost invariably associated with negative connotations: a falsehood, a delusion, or a mistaken belief that contradicts scientific facts, as reflected in the popular phrase "it is just a myth," which is commonly used to refute an allegedly baseless claim. However, such an understanding is essentially a legacy of a modern secular worldview, which historically emerged only after the European Enlightenment established scientific rationality as the sole measure of valid truth. Mircea Eliade, one of the most influential historians of religion in the 20th century, firmly rejected such reductionism in his work *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Eliade, 1957). For Eliade, a myth for the society that lives by it is not a fictitious tale created to entertain or frighten, but rather a sacred truth, specifically a hierophany, which is the manifestation of the sacred into the profane human world. Myth, in Eliade's view, recounts events that genuinely occurred at the beginning of time (*in illo tempore*, "in that time"), a primordial time that is qualitatively distinct from the profane time humans experience daily.

When traditional societies retell their creation myths or myths of ancestral origins, they are not entertaining themselves with fiction, but are instead re-presenting an absolute sacred reality that serves as a

paradigmatic model for all meaningful human actions, ranging from methods of cultivation and house construction to the procedures for conducting marriages. Therefore, studying myth anthropologically demands a fundamental shift in epistemological attitude. Instead of asking whether a myth is factually and historically true, a more relevant and productive question is what kind of truth is preserved and lived out by this myth for the society that adheres to it.

One of the most universal and fundamental functions of myth, as Eliade asserted, is the cosmological function, namely the ability of myth to answer the most ancient existential questions faced by every human civilization: where this universe originated, how the earth and sky were formed, and how humans first came into existence. Eliade refers to myths that answer these questions as cosmogonic myths, which are myths that narrate the creation of the world from primordial chaos into an ordered cosmos. Almost every civilization in the world possesses its own version of a cosmogonic myth. The Judeo-Christian tradition features the creation narrative in the Book of Genesis; the ancient Babylonian tradition has the *Enuma Elish* epic, which recounts the cosmic battle between the god Marduk and the chaos monster Tiamat; the Hindu tradition includes the creation story through the cosmic sacrifice of Purusha; and the Nusantara tradition itself is rich with cosmogonic myths, such as the tale of Batara Guru and the creation of Java in the Javanese tradition, as well as origin myths in various oral traditions of indigenous communities across Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Papua. The cosmological function of this myth is not merely to satisfy human intellectual curiosity regarding the origin of the universe, but it possesses a profoundly deeper existential function. Cosmogonic myths provide an assurance that the world in which humans live has order, meaning, and sacred legitimacy, rather than being merely an absurd and directionless empty space.

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ABOUT AUTHORS



Mister Gidion Maru is a Professor at English Education Department in Universitas Negeri Manado (UNIMA). He completed Sarjana Sastra in English Literature in Universitas Gadjah Mada in 1998. He is awarded Cum Laude for both his Master of Humanities (2006) majoring in Literature and for Doctorate (2013) of the same field at the same University. He

was also a former Fulbright research scholar in Bowling Green State University, Ohio, USA (2010). His research articles have been published in Scopus-indexed, WOS-Indexed and Sinta-Indexed Journals. Mister Gidion Maru has been also active in the competitive research grant by DRPTM Kemenristekdikti since 2013. He is currently an editor and reviewer for several Scopus, WOS, and Sinta Indexed journals. He has been a certified research reviewer since 2019. His interest are literary criticism, academic writing, cultural studies, text analysis, and essay writings related to character building. He can be reached at mrgidionmaru@unima.ac.id ORCHIDid: 0000-0001-7549-1922, Scopus Id: 57203402872, and WOS id: N-5665-2019



Sabrina Wardatul Jannah Husain, S.Pd., M.A is a lecturer at English Language and Literature Study Program of Universitas Negeri Manado (UNIMA). She earned her bachelor's degree in 2015 from Universitas Negeri Gorontalo and later obtained his Master's degree in 2018 from Universitas Gadjah Mada. Her research interest are literary criticism, cultural studies, and teaching English literature.



Muhammad Ilham Ali, S.S., M.Pd, is a lecturer at Universitas Negeri Manado, Indonesia. He earned his Magister degree in English Education from Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia, and his Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Hasanuddin University. His research interests are teaching English literature and literature analysis.

Literary Anthropology

Reading Culture, Power, and Identity in World Literature

This extensive theoretical and methodological book delves into the critical intersection of literary anthropology, illustrating how written and oral narratives function as crucial cultural documents rather than simple aesthetic objects. By bridging the gap between literary criticism and field ethnography, the book reimagines literature as a dynamic place for recreating social realities, investigating human experiences, and fighting power dynamics. It traces the evolution of foundational anthropological thought—from James George Frazer's comparative mythologies and Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis to Victor Turner's ritual performativity and Clifford Geertz's thick description—while also dismantling Western literacy biases with Walter J. Ong's orality theories. This profound theoretical foundation is illuminated by a rich tapestry of global and local narratives, ranging from the classical Epic of Gilgamesh and I La Galigo to Nusantara's oral traditions such as Mak Yong and Didong, and eventually extending its analysis into the contemporary realm of secondary orality in the digital age.

Moving fluidly beyond pure theory, the narrative delves into the political and institutional implications of literature, investigating the text as a ferocious battleground for power and representation. Drawing on the insights of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, the book examines how dominant organizations use speech and genre to legitimize power, thereby marginalizing or silencing subaltern voices. This systematic oppression is historically contextualized by Indonesia's own record of ideological censorship, such as the suppression of the Institute of People's Culture (LEKRA) and the institutional ban on Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Buru Quartet during the New Order era. In contrast, the text emphasizes how literature serves as a resilient weapon for the oppressed, employing James C. Scott's concept of hidden transcripts to explore daily resistance through protest songs, the subversive folklore of trickster figures such as Si Kancil, Kabayan, and Abu Nawas, as well as modern creative counter-narratives found in stand-up comedy.

This academic journey also addresses the contemporary ecological shift and the difficult creation of identity within the modern nation-state. Through the dual lenses of ecocriticism and disaster anthropology, the book demonstrates how literature preserves crucial ecological memories and indigenous semiotics, as famously exemplified by the survival archive of the Smong oral tradition in Simeulue, which saved thousands of lives during the 2004 tsunami, as well as traditional conservation systems rooted in sacred prohibitions (pali). This ecological awareness is deeply intertwined with an analysis of national identity forged by Benedict Anderson's print capitalism, providing a critical critique of how class, gender, and ethnic minorities—particularly Papuan and Chinese-Indonesian communities—have historically been excluded from the collective national imagination. The discussion concludes by delving into the moving stories of post-1965 political exiles, Homi Bhabha's "third space" of cultural hybridity, and the ongoing post-Reformasi conflict between the revitalization of endangered regional languages and the dominance of a centralized national literature.



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