

CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL CRITICISM IN TWO NOVELS BY TERE LIYE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Literary works are never produced in a social vacuum; as a form of cultural practice, novels often become a space in which authors represent, negotiate, and criticize the power relations, legal conditions, economic disparities, and moral problems of the society in which they are written, yet studies that systematically compare how a single author constructs social criticism across two different novels through the textual, discursive, and sociocultural dimensions of Critical Discourse Analysis remain limited. This study aims to describe the construction of social criticism represented in two novels by Tere Liye, namely Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar and Janji, through the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis. This study uses a descriptive-qualitative approach employing the three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis model developed by Norman Fairclough, which consists of textual analysis, discursive practices, and sociocultural practices. The data consists of words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, and narratives that represent social criticism in both novels, obtained through close-reading and note-taking techniques from the two novels as the primary data source, and analyzed through data reduction, categorization according to Fairclough's three dimensions, and interpretation, with validity maintained through cross-checking between textual data, interpretation, and theoretical concepts. The findings show that social criticism in both novels is constructed through representations of power inequality, abuse of the law, greed, social injustice, relationships between dominant and marginalized groups, and moral issues in society. At the textual level, criticism is constructed through evaluative diction, metaphors, sentence structures, dialogues, and character narratives. At the level of discursive practice, social criticism is generated through character experiences and conflicts between social groups. At the level of sociocultural practice, discourse is related to issues of power, law, economics, morality, and social inequality. These findings show that literary works function not only as entertainment but also as a medium to represent, criticize, and reflect on social reality.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is a form of cultural practice that cannot be separated from the social reality in which it was born and developed. As a cultural product, literary works do not exist in a vacuum, but are always connected to the social, political, economic, and ideological context that surrounds them. Through literary works, an author can represent various problems that arise in people's lives, ranging from social inequality, power dynamics, legal problems, economic conditions, education, morality, to intergroup relations in society. Thus, literature can be understood not only as a product of imagination but also as a space for the production and reproduction of discourses on social life (Talaat et al., 2026, p. 49).

Novels as one of the literary genres have a strong capacity to present social issues in depth through the construction of characters, conflicts, settings, dialogues, and narrative series of events. An author builds a certain perspective on a problem through his or her language choices. The choice of diction, sentence structure, use of metaphors, and narrative patterns ultimately shape the reader's perspective on the social reality represented in the story. In the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, language in literary texts is not just a means of communication, but is loaded with ideological content and power relations that work subtly but systematically (Harlita et al., 2026, p. 478).

Tere Liye is one of the most prolific and influential Indonesian writers in the contemporary era. With his real name Darwis, he has given birth to more than sixty novels that span from fantasy, romance, to socio-political fiction genres. Unlike many other Indonesian novelists, Tere Liye often explicitly touches on social and moral issues that are relevant to the real conditions of Indonesian society. His works not only offer entertainment, but also invite readers to reflect on various injustices, power inequality, and moral problems that occur in society. Two novels that are very worthy of analysis in this context are "*Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar*" and "*Janji*" (Rofiq & Munifah, 2023, p. 67).

The novel "*Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar*" explicitly raises issues of law, power, and morality. This novel tells the journey of a character who faces directly with the legal system controlled by interested parties. Through a dramatic series of events, this novel criticizes the condition in which the law no longer stands as an instrument of justice, but has become a tool for those in power to perpetuate their interests. The title of the novel itself contains irony that can be interpreted as a sarcastic appeal to the public not to be critical of the system that oppresses them (Akbar et al., 2025, p. 26).

Meanwhile, the novel *Janji* tells the journey of three main characters, namely Hasan, Baso, and Kahar. In the process of searching for a person named Bahar. On this journey, the three characters are faced with various social contradictions: between wealth and poverty, between power and weakness, and between promises kept and promises betrayed. This novel fundamentally questions what happiness and success in life really are. (Ramadani & Satriani, 2025, p. 68)

Both novels have characteristics that are suitable for study using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA views language not as neutral, but rather as a social practice linked to ideology and power. Therefore, the research on language in these novels focuses not only on linguistic structures, but also on how language constructs certain social representations. (Xing, 2024, p. 181) This view is reinforced by studies that apply Fairclough's model directly to prose fiction across different literary traditions, which consistently show that novelistic language encodes power relations and ideological positioning even when criticism is not stated explicitly (Baharvand et al., 2023, p. 58; Warzecha, 2014, p. 176).

The Critical Discourse Analysis Model developed by Norman Fairclough became the most relevant theoretical framework in this study. Fairclough conceptualizes discourse through three interrelated dimensions of analysis: the text dimension, the discursive practice dimension, and the sociocultural practice dimension (Fairclough in Darma, 2022). The text dimension is used to observe the language choices that form certain representations in the text. Discursive

practice examines the processes of production, distribution, and consumption of texts. Sociocultural practices connect discourse with broader social, cultural, and ideological contexts (Naurah & Siregar, 2023, p. 20).

This research is important because social criticism in literary works is not always conveyed directly. Criticism can be constructed through metaphors, character dialogue, conflicts, depictions of specific groups, and authors' narratives. Therefore, Critical Discourse Analysis can help uncover the ideologies and power relations that underlie the use of language in literary works (Irmayanti et al., 2025, p. 336).

Research on social criticism in Tere Liye's work has been conducted by several previous researchers. Badrih and Wahyudi (2021) analyzed the moral values in Tere Liye's novel and found that the works consistently inserted critical messages about the condition of society (Badrih et al., 2025). The second research by Rifka Afifah et al. (2026) with the title "Educational Comparison Between Novels *Bumi Manusia* The Work of Ananta Toer and *Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar* The Works of Tere Liye", The results of his research show that both novels function as a medium of social transformation and character education. Novels *Human Earth* presents colonial resistance through a poetic-symbolic style, while Tere Liye's work critiques modern capitalism in a straightforward manner (Afifah et al., 2026). Third, research by Harlita et al. (2026) with the title "The Values of Character Education in Novels *Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar*" Work Charity for You *Perminus Farm* The Work of Ramadhan K.H: Intertextual Studies". The research highlights two novels from different authors, and only reviews aspects of educational values (Harlita et al., 2026). However, research that comparatively analyzes Tere Liye's two novels using Fairclough's CDA framework is still very limited, so this research is here to fill the gap.

Taken together, the state of the art on Tere Liye's novels shows three main tendencies in prior research: studies that isolate moral or educational values within a single novel (Afif et al., 2026; Zuliha et al., 2026; Amilah et al., 2023), studies that compare Tere Liye's work with novels by other authors on an educational or intertextual basis (Afifah et al., 2026; Harlita et al., 2026), and studies that examine only one of the two novels used in this research through a single theoretical lens, such as poverty theory or Foucauldian power analysis (Talaah et al., 2026, p. 49; Ramadani & Satriani, 2025, p. 68). What remains absent from this body of work is a systematic, three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis that treats *Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar* and *Janji* as a single comparative case. The two novels were deliberately selected because they represent two contrasting rhetorical strategies within the same author's body of work: the first constructs criticism through direct confrontation with the legal and political system, while the second constructs criticism through a more reflective, existential exploration of wealth and social class. This comparative design constitutes the novelty of the present study, as it allows social criticism to be traced not merely as a recurring theme but as a set of discursive strategies that vary even within a single author's oeuvre (Baharvand et al., 2023, p. 45).

This research is important because social criticism in literary works is not always conveyed directly and explicitly. Criticism can be subtly constructed through metaphors, irony, dialogue between characters, conflicts, depictions of certain social groups, and narrative structures chosen by the author. Therefore, Critical Discourse Analysis provides the right methodological tools to uncover the layers of ideological meaning and power relations that work behind the surface of literary texts (Permana & Hamdani, 2025, p. 61).

Based on this picture, this study focuses on the construction of social criticism in the novels "*Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar*" and "*Janji*" by Tere Liye. The research problems are formulated as follows: (1) how social criticism is built on the textual dimension in both novels; (2) how discursive practices shape social criticism; and (3) how social practices and power relations are represented through the discourse in the two novels.

The purpose of this research is to describe the construction of social criticism across the dimensions of text, discursive practices, and social practices in the novels "*Teruslah Bodoh*

Jangan Pintar” and “Janji” by Tere Liye.

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research data in the form of words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, and narratives that represent the construction of social criticism, which requires in-depth and contextual interpretation rather than statistical calculations (Moleong, 2018). Qualitative research in literature studies allows researchers to explore the meaning, nuances, and complexity of texts holistically (Afif et al., 2026, p. 100).

The data source for this study consisted of two novels by Tere Liye, namely *Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar* and *Janji*. Bibliographic data showed that “*Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar*” was published by Sabak Grip Nusantara. Data were collected using reading and recording techniques. The researcher read the two novels intensively, identified the parts that contained social criticism, recorded the relevant data, and categorized them based on the dimensions of Critical Discourse Analysis by Norman Fairclough at 1995.

Data analysis is carried out through three stages:

1. Textual analysis, which aims to identify the linguistic forms used to construct social criticism.
2. Discursive practice analysis, which aims to examine the relationship between texts, characters, conflicts, and discourse formation processes.
3. Analysis of social practices, which aims to connect discourse to broader social contexts and power relations.

The validity of the data is maintained through constant observation and by cross-checking the consistency between the textual data, interpretations, and theoretical concepts. The analyzed data is obtained directly from the specific novel editions that the researcher uses to ensure the page number can be verified correctly. (Sugiyono, 2021)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Construction of Social Criticism in the Novel *Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar* (TBJP)

1. Textual Dimension: Criticism of Power and Law

One of the most dominant issues in TBJP's novel is the relationship between power and law. Tere Liye builds a critique of a condition in which the law no longer stands as a guarantor of justice, but has been transformed into an instrument manipulated by the ruling parties. This is evident in the following excerpt:

"The law is like a knife. In the right hand, it can save. In the wrong hand, it can kill. And in this country, the knife has been held by the wrong hand for too long."
(Liye, 2024, p. 47)

In the above quote, Tere Liye uses the metaphor of law as a knife of an instrument that can double function depending on who holds it. The phrase "held by the wrong hand for too long" implies that this condition is not a temporary anomaly, but rather is already rooted as a systemic structure. At the textual level, the use of evaluative diction such as "wrong hand" and "too long" creates a firm moral judgment. This construction is in line with Fairclough's concept of representational meaning in that the text represents aspects of the social world from a non-neutral point of view (Silaswati, 2019, p. 6)

Criticism of authorities abusing power is also built through the following dialogues:
"You think I care about justice? Justice is only for those who have no power. For those of us who are in power, the law can be formed according to our interests."
(Liye, 2024, p. 112)

This quote explicitly represents the ideology of the dominant group. The speaker does not try to hide his views. He openly states that justice is only relevant to those who

have no power. Within the framework of Fairclough's CDA, this dialogue works on two levels: at the textual level, declarative sentences are presuppositions that reflect the ideological viewpoint of the figure; at the level of sociocultural practice, it intertextualizes the discourse on systemic corruption that is familiar in Indonesia's socio-political context (Naurah & Siregar, 2023, p. 21)

2. Criticism of Hypocrisy and Greed

TBJP's novel also builds a sharp critique of hypocrisy and greed. Tere Liye depicts characters who appear with an image of simplicity and virtue in front of the public, while actually harboring destructive economic and political interests. This criticism is seen in the following narrative:

"He always looks simple in front of the camera. Shabby batik clothes, flip-flops, eating at roadside stalls. But behind it all, his accounts abroad are full of people's money that has been extorted over the years." (Liye, 2024, p. 89)

In this excerpt, Tere Liye establishes a stark contrast between appearance and reality. The concrete visual description of "shabby batik shirts, flip-flops, eating at a roadside stall" has created an image of simplicity that is sharply contrasted with the facts in the next sentence. This contrast strategy is what Fairclough calls the foregrounding technique: highlighting contradictions for critical effect (Ramadani & Satriani, 2025, p. 69). The use of the phrase 'extorted people's money' contains a very striking metaphor; the word 'extorted' not only indicates forced taking, but also carries dehumanizing implications that are reflected in the choice of diction (Ramadani & Satriani, 2025, p. 71).

The criticism of greed is emphasized through the following dialogue:

"How much more do you want? This land has given you everything, but you keep taking and taking, like a man who is never full even after eating a mountain." (Liye, 2024, p. 156).

The metaphor "never be full even after eating a mountain" effectively describes the character of greed that has no limits. This use of hyperbole reinforces the impression that the conditions under criticism have gone beyond the normal limits of human greed. Discursively, this dialogue serves as an articulation of moral voices that challenge corrupt power structures (Prihambada et al., 2025, p. 577).

3. Sociocultural Dimension: Reflection of Indonesian Reality

In the dimension of sociocultural practices, the discourse in TBJP clearly interacts with contemporary Indonesian socio-political conditions. Criticism of weak legal systems, hypocritical officials, and elite greed reflect real issues that are public issues in Indonesia (Akbar et al., 2025, p. 28). Tere Liye writes in the following reflective narrative:

"Maybe this is the best way to survive in this country: keep being stupid, don't be smart. Because those who are smart will start asking questions, and those who ask will become threats. And those threats must be eliminated." (Liye, 2024, p. 203)

The quote that reflects the title of this novel contains a profound irony. Title *Keep Being Stupid Don't Be Smart* At first it sounds like a paradoxical appeal, but in the context of the novel's discourse, it is an irony that serves as a critique: a corrupt power system deliberately wants the people to remain uncritical so as not to become a threat. The "cleverness" in this novel is not just about intellectuality, but about critical awareness to question injustice (Jannah & Rahmawati, 2025, p. 4297)

B. The Construction of Social Criticism in the *Janji* Novel

1. Textual Dimension: A Critique of Social Class Inequality

The novel "*Janji*" builds its social critique through an in-depth exploration of social class inequality, wealth, poverty, and existential questions about the meaning of happiness (Kristiyanto et al., 2022a, p. 200). This is evident in the dialogue between characters from different social backgrounds:

"You know the difference between the rich and the poor, Hasan? Not in the money. Not in the clothes. But in the way they are treated. Rich people can be guilty and remain free. Poor people are not necessarily guilty of being locked up." (Liye, 2021, p. 78)

In this quote, the figure formulates class inequality not in material terms, but in terms of access to justice. The choice of contrast constructed from the phrase "rich people can be guilty and remain free" versus "the poor are not necessarily even guilty of being locked up" has revealed the systemic dimension of inequality (Nurhikmah & Karlina, 2025, p. 19). From Fairclough's textual perspective, the use of parallel structures ('not in his money... not in his clothes... but in the way they are treated') that can create a powerful rhetorical effect through a successive rejection of common assumptions before offering alternative definitions (Mudiawati et al., 2023, p. 746).

2. Criticism of Materialism and Value Orientation

The "*Janji*" novel also builds a critique of the materialistic orientation of society that measures human success and dignity solely from the parameters of wealth and social status (Zuliha et al., 2026, p. 148). This is seen in the following reflective narrative:

"Thirty years of hard work Bahar, accumulating wealth, climbing the ladder of power. But when he finally reached the top, all he found was emptiness. The summit turned out not to be the paradise he had imagined. It was just a cold, lonely cliff far from the people he loved." (Liye, 2021, p. 145)

The metaphor of the climbing journey ('climbing the ladder of power', 'reaching the top', 'the cold cliff') builds a powerful allegory about social ambition and its consequences. The depiction of the pinnacle of power and wealth as a 'cold, lonely cliff' is the antithesis of the ideal image of success that has been socialized in societal discourse. Through this contrast, Tere Liye critiques the dominant narrative of 'success' and offers alternative reflections on the meaning of meaningful life (Fatmawati et al., 2024).

The criticism of materialism is further strengthened in the following dialogue involving Baso's character:

"We are taught that life is about accumulating as much as possible. But no one teaches us that there is a limit to satiety. No one tells us that sometimes, letting go of something actually makes us richer than before." (See, 2021, p. 167)

This statement directly questions the dominant value system that is socialized through various institutions. The phrase 'we are taught' indicates a systemic and collective process of socialization of values. The criticism built here is not only against materialistic individuals, but against the value system that massively reproduces this materialistic orientation (Siu & Namang, 2024).

3. Sociocultural Dimensions: Poverty, Education, and Social Mobility

In the sociocultural dimension, the novel "*Janji*" builds a discourse that is in direct contact with the issues of poverty, education, and social mobility in Indonesia. This novel describes how a person's socio-economic background determines their access to education, opportunity, and justice. This can be seen in the following description:

"In that school, the gates are open to everyone. But for some reason, children from poor families always sit in the back seats, get old books, and teachers who

are tired. While the children of rich people sit in the front, new books, and the best teachers. The same gate. A different world." (Liye, 2021, p. 56)

This quote builds on a critique of an education system that formally claims equality ('its gates are indeed open to everyone'), but in practice reproduces and reinforces existing class inequality. The concluding sentence 'Same gate. A different world.' is a very effective statement that is short, dense, and contains sharp contradictions. From the CDA's perspective, this is an example of how literary texts can dismantle the 'equality discourse' that is the surface behind real structural inequality (Kristiyanto et al., 2022; Mujtaba et al., 2025).

Table 1 Comparison of the Construction of Social Criticism in the Two Novels

Dimensions of Analysis	<i>Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar</i> (Keep Being Stupid Don't Be Smart)	<i>Janji</i> (Promise)
Text Dimensions	Evaluative metaphors (law = knives), dehumanizing diction (squeezed), structural irony, appearance-reality opposition, confessional sentences of antagonistic characters	Parallel structures of opposition (rich vs. poor), metaphors of the climbing journey, reflective-existential sentences, monologues of character recognition, material-spiritual contrasts
Discursive Practices	Protagonist conflict vs. legal system and power; confrontational dialogue exposing dominant ideologies; investigative narrative	The physical and mental journey of the three characters as a medium of critical consciousness; meetings with figures from various social classes; the process of finding meaning
Sociocultural Practices	Abuse of the law, systemic corruption, hegemony of power, elite hypocrisy, repression of the critical attitude of the people	Social class inequality, materialism, inequality of access to education, structural poverty, crisis of moral and spiritual values
Criticized Dominant Ideology	False legalism and legal instrumentalization; power as a privilege of the elite group	Materialism and consumerism; success is measured by material accumulation; social status as a determinant of human dignity
Critical Strategy	Irony, metaphor of demasking (unmasking), direct confrontational dialogue	Travel allegories, oppositional contrasts, reflective monologues, detailed descriptive narratives

Table 1 shows that although both novels raise the theme of social criticism, the narrative and linguistic strategies used differ significantly. TBJP tends to use a more direct and confrontational approach, while “*Janji*” takes a more reflective and existential path. Nevertheless, both novels share the same fundamental premise: that power and material wealth should not be the primary benchmark of human value and dignity. This reflects the consistency of Tere Liye's ideological position as an author who consciously positions himself as a moral voice in the Indonesian social landscape (Amilah et al., 2023).

The findings of this study are in line with the results of the study (Akbar et al., 2025; Zuliha et al., 2026) which shows that Tere Liye's novels consistently use the strategy of power representation to critique social conditions. Similarly, research (Wulandari et al., 2024) who found that social injustice in the novel Promise is represented through a variety of linguistic devices that work at the textual, discursive, and sociocultural levels. These findings also strengthen the argument (Arisa et al., 2025) that contemporary Indonesian literary works are an effective medium to criticize and document social problems that occur in society.

The difference in rhetorical strategy between the two novels is not incidental but can be explained by the different social phenomena each novel is designed to confront. TBJP concentrates its criticism on institutions of law and power, domains in which abuses are visible,

external, and structural; a direct, confrontational mode of critique is therefore better suited to exposing the gap between the stated function of the law and its actual operation, consistent with findings that legal and political discourse in Indonesian literary and public texts tends to be criticized through explicit oppositional framing rather than implication (Mudiawati et al., 2023, p. 746). *Janji*, by contrast, is concerned with materialism and the meaning of success, issues that are internalized and experienced subjectively rather than imposed by a visible external authority; a reflective, existential narrative mode allows the text to interrogate values that have already been absorbed by the characters themselves, which aligns with Foucauldian readings of the novel showing that power in *Janji* operates productively, through normalization of aspiration rather than open repression (Ramadani & Satriani, 2025, p. 68). Read together, the two novels suggest that Tere Liye adapts his critical strategy to the nature of the power being criticized: confrontation where power is coercive and institutional, and reflection where power is normalized and internalized, a pattern that extends previous single-novel findings on Tere Liye's social criticism (Akbar et al., 2025, p. 26) into a more general account of his authorial method across works.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, it can be concluded that the construction of social criticism in the novels *Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar* and *Janji* by Tere Liye is built through the complex interaction between language choices, narrative structure, character experiences, and the social conditions represented.

First, on the textual dimension, both novels construct social criticism through diverse linguistic devices. *Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar*'s novel uses evaluative metaphors (law as a knife, greed that never gets full), structural irony in titles and narratives, and confrontational dialogues that expose dominant ideologies directly. The novel *Janji* uses oppositional parallel structures to contrast rich and poor conditions, travel metaphors to construct allegories about ambition and emptiness, and reflective monologues that encourage readers to question dominant values.

Second, in the dimension of discursive practice, *Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar* builds its criticism through direct conflict between the protagonist and the corrupt legal and power system, while *Janji* uses the physical and mental journeys of the three main characters as a medium to build a gradual critical consciousness. Both novels utilize character experiences and narrative conflicts as an effective means to articulate social criticism to readers.

Third, in the dimension of sociocultural practice, the discourses in both novels interact directly with real problems in Indonesian society: the abuse of law and power, systemic corruption, social class inequality, materialism, and the crisis of moral values. *Teruslah Bodoh Jangan Pintar* specifically criticizes the conditions in which law has been transformed into a tool of power, while *Janji* criticizes a materialistic value system that measures human dignity solely from the parameters of wealth and social status.

Overall, Tere Liye's two novels prove that literary works function not merely as passive mirrors of social reality, but as an active space to critique unjust social structures and offer alternative moral contemplation. This study recommends a follow-up study that explores Tere Liye's other novels within the framework of CDA, as well as a comparative study that compares the construction of social criticism in Tere Liye's work with other Indonesian social literary authors.

Theoretically, this study extends Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis from its more common application to a single literary or media text toward a comparative analysis across two novels by the same author, demonstrating that CDA can reveal not only what an author criticizes but how the choice of textual strategy shifts according to the nature of the power relation under critique. Practically, the findings can inform the design of literature-based teaching materials in Indonesian secondary and tertiary education, since both novels offer accessible entry points for

discussing law, power, materialism, and social class with students, while the identified rhetorical patterns (confrontational versus reflective critique) can serve as a model for teaching close reading of ideology in fiction more broadly.

This study also has several limitations. First, the analysis relies on purposively selected excerpts considered representative of each critical theme, so the findings should not be read as an exhaustive account of every instance of social criticism in the two novels. Second, as a qualitative, interpretive study, the analysis inevitably involves the researchers' own reading of metaphor, irony, and characters' ideological positioning; although validity was supported through cross-checking between textual data and theoretical concepts, a degree of interpretive subjectivity cannot be entirely eliminated. Third, the study is limited to two novels by a single author, so the patterns identified here cannot yet be generalized to Tere Liye's wider body of work or to Indonesian social-criticism literature in general without further comparative research, as recommended above.

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