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# The Charms of the Nature vs. Realities of People Living alongside the Water in Indonesian Poetry

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## ABSTRACT

In Indonesia, a country in which 70% of its area is water, people relate easily to both the sea and inland water, such as rivers and lakes. Authors consequently also find inspiration in these bodies of water, expressing their admiration towards the beauty of nature. For example, while they originate from different literary eras, “Danau Toba” (Lake Toba) by Sitor Situmorang, “Sepantun Laut” (Like the Sea) by J.E. Tatengkeng, “Akulah Si Telaga” (I am the Lake) by Sapardi Djoko Damono, “Apa Kata Bintang di Laut” (What the Star Tells the Sea) by Iwan Simatupang, “Kali Martapura” (Martapura River) by Hidjaz Yamani, and “Perempuan Pesisiran” (Women on the Coasts) by Iman Sembada all reflect the dynamic portrayals of water in Indonesian literature, as a charm of nature from each poet’s perspective or a framework for criticizing the realities of the lives of the people who live alongside water. This research analyzed these authors’ interconnectedness with nature, employing the qualitative descriptive method and using ecocriticism theory, which explores how nature is depicted in the respective poems and connects human relationships to nature. The results showed that the poets easily relate to the river, lake, or sea, and aside from describing the beauty of nature based on fond memories, their poems are used as critiques of the changing relationship between humans and nature, as well as between humans and humans. Their portrayals of nature further reveal the feelings of belonging engendered by water, which they use as criticism for the destruction of nature and societal changes stemming from the need for progress.

**Keywords:** *ecocriticism; lake; livelihood; river; sea*

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## INTRODUCTION

Water is inseparable from human life. The history of mankind tells that human settlements were established in areas in the more favorable places. Among other considerations are weather, fertile land, or near water sources. As much as vital to the sustainability of the race, water is one of the basic needs aside from defense or food. Water areas, in the form of rivers, lakes, seas, oceans, etc., are dispensable sources of life for the people, not only for everyday necessities but also for a much greater commercial purpose, such as transportation, agriculture, fishing, and even industry (Schmutz & Sendzimir, 2018).

Indonesia is the biggest archipelagic country in the world. Indonesia’s coastal area is 99,000 km, which is the second longest in the world—home to around 161 million people or 60% of the whole population of the country (Rudiarto et al., 2018). Other major water areas are lakes and rivers, with the former, amounting to more than 500 and covering 5000 square kilometers or about 0.25% of the land surface (Giesen, 1994) and the later amounting to 5.590 major spread across various regions (World Water Forum, 2024). This means that the sea territory owned by Indonesia is estimated 7,9 million sq. km of

the total area is 9.8 million sq km (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2016).

If not near the seas, people are used to having rivers across their cities or lakes (situ/creek) as their water sources. Therefore, for Indonesian authors, it is not difficult to relate to water and use it as a source of inspiration. From the early period of Indonesian literature to the modern era, prominent authors have written about the lake, sea, or river, using it not only to describe the beauty of nature but also to voice their feelings or ideas in their poems. "Danau Toba" by Sitor Situmorang (2014), "Sepantun Laut" by J.E. Tatengkeng (1974), "Akulah Si Telaga" by Sapardi Djoko Damono (2014), "Apa Kata Bintang di Laut" by Iwan Simatupang (McGlynn et al., 2017), "Kali Martapura" by Hidjaz Yamani (McGlynn et al., 2017), and "Perempuan Pesisiran" by Iman Sembada (2018), from different Indonesian literary eras are the examples. All poets, regardless of gender, seem to succeed in portraying water, in both the charms of nature or their criticisms of the realities of the people residing alongside water. Through the poems, they catch the dynamic portrayal of water from their respective points of view. Aside from the sceneries, some messages lie behind; i.e., the poems of concern by Iman Sembada and Iwan Simatupang are a critique of the communities. Meanwhile, Hidjaz Yamani's poem is a critique of the environment and the communities that exploited nature.

This study used the descriptive qualitative method. The poems, "Danau Toba", "Sepantun Laut", "Akulah Si Telaga", "Apa Kata Bintang di Laut", "Kali Martapura", and "Perempuan Pesisiran" were analyzed to see how the authors relate to the river, lake, or sea. They express their feelings towards the beauty of nature through their poems. An ecocriticism literary approach was used to analyze the human and non-human relationship and to gain a better understanding of how humans relate to nature and how writers use the river, the lake, or the sea, to which they belong, to voice their concerns over the natural destruction or societal changes in communities resulting from advancement.

The study of nature in literature or eco-literature assists readers in understanding nature better in its wider significance, which means the physical environment consists of humans and non-humans (Mishra, 2016). Thus, they understand the relationship between humans and between humans and nature.

To examine the relationship between literature

and the physical environment, ecocriticism adopts an earth-centered perspective in literary studies (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). Further, ecocriticism focuses on the links between nature and culture, particularly through language and culture. It serves as a bridge between human and nonhuman elements. In literary scholarship, ecocriticism presents as environmental restoration with the understanding of environmental thinking. Literary scholars focus on questions of value, meaning, tradition, point of view, and language that offer a substantial contribution for environmental thought (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996).

Since 1993, ecological literary study has emerged as a recognizable critical school and has contributed to how literary scholars can contextualize environmental issues by giving an understanding of the phenomena in literary texts. Adopted by ecocriticism, environmental literary studies emphasize the interplay between literature, ecological awareness, and understanding (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). It showed literary scholarship contributed to the issue of the environment. Cheryl Glotfelty delineated the genesis of environmental studies in the 1980s, citing Frederick O. Waage's seminal work, "Teaching Environmental Literature: Material, Methods, Resources" (1985), which underscored the integration of environmental concerns within literary disciplines. Additionally, Alicia Nitecki established The American Nature Writing Newsletter in 1989 to serve as a platform for diverse writings focusing on nature and the environment.

Research about the interconnectedness of human beings with bodies of water has been conducted in the past, albeit separately on either the sea, the lake, or the river. Rohman (2015) describes water as a force of destruction and a source of life in various forms of Indonesian literary studies such as folklore, novels, and even holy texts. However, their study does not solely explore the collection of Indonesian poetry and its analysis of water as both destruction and a source of life. The analysis of Indonesian poetry to ecocriticism remains relatively rare and underexplored. Dewi (2020), meanwhile, explores the relationship of women with the rivers, which is very intimate to Southeast Asian people. The rivers provide the people not only with water but also a livelihood. Another study focused on how literature contributes to natural problems in a children's novel, *Mata dan Manusia Laut* by Okky Madasari, similarly

highlights the problem of marine pollution (Savitri et al., 2023).

This research analyzed the authors' interconnectedness with nature, wherein bodies of water are the expression of admiration towards the wonder of nature but at the same time, a critique of the realities of people living alongside these bodies of water.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### The Charms of the Nature

Close to the sea, the beach is a dominating promotion image of Indonesia. Although the global "Wonderful Indonesia" advertisement images depict the culture, the friendliness of the people, the religious people (Poyk & Pandjaitan, 2016), the sandy beaches, the seas, and the ocean still dominate the faces of Indonesia. Many cultures claim the sea as their identity, Indonesians see the beach as something of their life and in cultural expressions. Aside from the sea and the longest coastline in Indonesia, the country is also blessed with other water sources, lakes, and rivers. The National Development Planning Agency estimates that as of 2016 data, "Indonesia has 1,575 lakes consisting of 840 large-sized lakes and 735 small-sized lakes, in a total area of around 491,724 hectares" (Indonesia Window, 2020). The World Water Forum (2024) reports "Indonesia has around 5.590 major rivers and 65.017 tributaries spread across various regions. As vital water sources, rivers provide multiple benefits for the sustainability of communities". As part of nature, the seas, lakes, or rivers have resources on which people depend for their livelihood while the people around the coastlines depend largely on the sea resources for their livelihood—generally dependent on agriculture and fisheries (Saleh, 2017).

With the number of seas, lakes, and rivers all over Indonesia, it is easy for people to relate themselves to the inland water or the sea. Therefore, when writing their poems, Indonesian authors will use them to express human experience since become the inspiration for authors to explore a rich tapestry of themes, symbols, and settings. J.E. Tatengkeng in "Sepantun Laut" (1974) depicts the beauty of nature and humans' relation to the sea. As a person who grew up near the sea, Tatengkeng relates easily to the nature which he called home and pours out his longing for home with the portrayal of the sea with

loads of fond memories:

*Duduk di pantai waktu senja,  
Naik di rakit buaian ombak,  
Sambil bercermin di air kaca,  
Lagi diayunkan lagu ombak.*

(Tatengkeng, 1974: 30)

Sitting on the beach at dusk,  
On the raft cradled by the waves,  
The clear water reflects on my face,  
While the song of the waves rocks me.

Tatengkeng raised in the Talaud islands in North Sulawesi Province, found himself so relaxed in the above stanza when he related to the sea. His memories of home are reflected by all elements related to the sea: the beach, the raft, the waves, and the clean water. The view of the sea and its surrounding landscapes in the poem are calm and serene, and the only loud sound is the crushing wave on the shore (line 4) but underneath, lies a powerful force, that is unfathomable and mysterious (lines 1, 2):

*Lautan besar bagai bermimpi,  
Tidak gerak, tetap berbaring...  
Tapi pandang karang di tepi,  
Di sana ombak memecah nyaring...*

(Tatengkeng, 1974: 30)

The big ocean is like a dream,  
Laid still...  
But gazed at the rock on the shore,  
Where the wave crashed so loudly...

The portrait of the sea landscapes, in Iwan Simatupang's "Apa Kata Bintang di Laut":

*dia berasal dari pegunungan  
dari puncak mengabut selalu  
---di mana jurang, tebing dan bukit  
berkisah seharian dalam sepi menggelepar  
tentang bayang mengejar sinar  
tentang redup memagut cuaca*

(Simatupang, 2017)

He comes from the mountains  
From the peak always covered in mist  
---where ravines, cliffs and hills  
Tell stories all day in sprawling solitude  
About shadows chasing beams of light  
about haze clutching the weather

The above lines explain the mysterious and majestic nature. In many parts of the sea, stretch the mountains whose sides are usually cliffs or hilly lands. The mountains are depicted as very tall and cold, as the fog is already at its peak, adding mystery to the portraits. From a distant island where the speaker lived, he portrayed his search for this kidnapped mother through the sea, the bays, and the straits. Even the symbols of loneliness are portrayed with the charms of nature, i.e. “a pirate from a distant island,” “ruler of the strait,” who came from “the peak of the mountain, that is always covered in mist.” He mentioned the seaside sceneries are very familiar to the people living alongside the seas as he narrates his lone journey: ravines, cliffs, beaches, straits, bays, and islands. The picturesque scenery of the seaside that Simatupang mentioned can also be found on the lakesides, the nature-made lakes like “Danau Toba” by Situmorang (2014).

In “Danau Toba”, Situmorang (2014) expresses his longing for his homeland through the lake and the charms of the dynamic quality of its surroundings. For the Batak people, especially the sub-ethnic Toba, to which the author belonged, Lake Toba is the center of the people’s life. They connect themselves with the lake because their livelihood is mainly supported by it. To him, the lake is the people and the land he longed for, thus the human and nature relationship. The lake is the home where activities to important events or milestones take place, even today. Home for Situmorang, too, is the lake, as he remembers it through the dynamic portrayal of the water “the green cliff where the fish play amongst the moss that dances in the clear water” (lines 21-24). As the center of the people’s life, the lake personifies the people who observe and celebrate the three most important stages of life, i.e. birth, wedding, and death (lines 48-50), and their religious celebration, Christmas (lines 51-54). His admiration for nature and the environment i.e. the largest volcanic lake in the world, “the giant black stones, as the remains of the earth eruption (lines 25-26), and “the ancient scenery of the lake surroundings” (line 27). The rare beauty of nature is the remains of the ancient volcano’s eruption some 75,000 years ago (Hunt, 2024).

Damono’s “Akulah Si Telaga” (2014) presents the sailing in the lake as a symbol of life’s journey. The lake components presented in the poems represent the dynamic quality of the waves: “ripples” (line 2) and

the lotus flowers are swaying because the small wave (line 3) is mentioned directly. After all, the author wanted to focus on the lake and the sailing. No matter how big the challenge that must be faced in life, sail to where you are supposed to go, to “the other side” (line 5). For Damono, the lake is less violent compared to the sea, only “ripples on the surface, but strong enough to make lotus flowers swaying” (lines 2-3).

“Kali Martapura” is another Indonesian poet’s adoration for Indonesian nature. Martapura River is a tributary of Barito River. It is 600 km long, with the upstream being a big river in the South Kalimantan Province—Banjarmasin City, crossed by many rivers, with the Barito River and the Martapura River as the major ones. The city of Banjarmasin itself is divided by the Martapura River (Rusdiyanto & Munawir, 2023). Kalimantan with Kapuas being the longest river (1143 km). Martapura city, where the river got its name, is famous for precious and semi-precious gems. “Kali Martapura” by Hidjaz Yamani (McGlynn et al., 2017) introduced the cultural heritage of the people, through traditional “floating house” (lanting-lanting) along the river,” “traditional boat (dukuh-dukuh),” and of course, the famous floating market of Martapura. The long bridge, in particular, is worth mentioning because the rivers in Kalimantan are expansive, Martapura itself is 220 m wide, not too wide compared to the longest river Kapuas (1143 km) with 700 m wide in its delta. For the people of Kalimantan, aside from fisheries, they also live from traditional farming and mining.

### **Realities of People Living Alongside Water**

The story behind the portrayal of lakes, rivers, or seas varies, depending on the intention, if any, or just a description of the beautiful sceneries that attracted the authors. However, authors write more than just what is seen, they see deeper to the core of each literary work they compose. Literary authors also raise social issues by attracting people’s attention through the issue of the sea. Contrary to its picturesque image, the (real) sea is violent, and ruthless because nature is not so kind, especially to the people living along the coastlines. The generous seas that provide for the people are hazardous at times. Erosion, landslides, floods, or sea level rise are the natural hazards that must be faced by the coastal communities living near the seas. Today, approximately 3 billion people—about half of the world’s population—live within 200

km of a coastline (Population Reference Bureau, 2003) and most of them depend their livelihood on fishing.

Societal change happens. Studies have shown that poverty in the coastal areas are caused by the people's dependency on (traditional and seasonal) fisheries. It is made worse with a modern fishery, that leaves the traditional catch to gather only the "leftovers". To the rural poor people living on the coasts, the seas are their lives where they live day to day from the generosity of the sea for survival and income. However, they have to lose their belongings or even their lives due to natural disasters that happen from time to time. The tides that come and wash away whatever in the shores portray perfectly the life of the people on the coasts and they build their life again when the sea level falls.

"Danau Toba" (Situmorang, 2014) shows relationships between human through their interaction in everyday busy life, i.e. a child waiting for his/her father coming home from work (line 1), his/her mother from the market bringing rice cake (line 8), interaction of the old and the young at night under the moonlight (line 10), children playing in the caves full of bees (line 15), or the big sister calling the writer home for supper (lines 29-30). The busy life that he longs is described explicitly. The poem also depicts the human and nature relationship through the portrayal of the life cycle of the Batak people, which revolves around the lake, especially the most essential event, birth, and death (lines 40-41). The author's longing for home is nostalgic, both human and human or human and nature relationships due to nature's exploitation of the lake for the sake of economic purposes.

"Sepantun Laut" (Tatengkeng, 1974) and "Akulah Si Telaga" (Damono, 2014) are rich in human-to-nature symbolism. Like "Danau Toba", "Sepantun Laut" is the author's way of relating to nature where he belongs. Coming from Sangihe Talaud, North Sulawesi, Tatengkeng describes his human-to-nature relationship through his way of letting nature (the sea) take him along with it: staying silent on a raft that is swept away by the waves, looking at himself the water's reflection, and enjoying the wind blow or listening to the sound of the waves (lines 1-4). However, with humans competing to control nature, the indigenous people can no longer call the seas their 'homes' since the rapid commercialization of the seashores or the beaches have put them aside, leaving them only to wonder, wail, and yearn (lines 13-14).

"Akulah Si Telaga" (Damono, 2014) is also the way the author relates to nature, a typical portrayal that is used by inland inhabitants who are close to this water resource.

A very strong criticism of the society comes from "Perempuan Pesisiran" (Sembada, 2018) that depicts the life of the coastal areas of Java which is far from the beautiful scenery of the coast. It is a blunt picture of human relationships. The poem describes a traditional fishing community where men act as providers for their families. Boys, too, are expected to follow their fathers' footsteps while women's roles are limited to the land, not the seas:

*Lalu kau saksikan anak-anak nelayan  
Menjala ikan-ikan dan harapan sebagai hasil  
Tangkapan di masa depan.*

(Sembada, 2018)

Then you watch Fishermen's boys  
Catch their fish and chase their hope  
For their future.

Fishermen's market or fishermen's children throwing the fishing net are not a vision of wealth or prosperity while "Apa Kata Bintang di Laut" is a vision of danger (lines 39-42):

*"Ibumu tiada akan pulang lagi, kawan,  
ia telah dibawa pergi oleh orang-orang  
datang merompak ke pekan nelayan  
dan bawa segala gadis dan janda*

(Simatupang, 2017)

...

"Your mother will not come home again, my friend,  
She has been taken away by people  
Who came and robbed the fishermen's market  
And took all the girls and widows

Like the shore that has no barriers to protect the people from the violent sea, the people, especially women, are prone to danger, not only the threat of pirates, "In a sailing ship with a black flag; With the image of a skull" (lines 43-44). When imagining the (hard) life of the people living on the coasts, we can go further to imagine that life is even harder for women, as stated in UN Women,

"While both men and women suffer in poverty, gender discrimination means that women

have far fewer resources to cope. They are likely to be the last to eat, the ones least likely to access healthcare, and routinely trapped in time-consuming, unpaid domestic tasks. They have more limited options to work or build businesses. Adequate education may lie out of reach. Some end up forced into sexual exploitation as part of a basic struggle to survive.”

(UN Women, 2015)

Pantai Utara (Pantura) or North Coastal Area of Java, in Indonesia, is well known as the northern Java Road for the smooth running of the economy. This highway route connects major cities in 4 provinces: Banten, West Java, Central Java, and East Java. As one of the busiest routes in Java, it has every service that people who travel need: food, gas, and even night entertainment. Pantura is also famous from its night entertainment. Women living on the coasts that everyday chores are helping the fishermen with their catch, putting it into the nearby market, or through the middlemen who will later sell to buyers. In some parts of the coastal areas, they also process the fish into salty dry fish for later use or sell to the market. Since they only depend on the weather, they are so used to spending days or weeks not doing anything because the fishermen cannot set sail due to bad weather. A study discovers the factors that significantly affect poverty are the number of household members, head of household education, and the catch payment on the household. Jember Regency is the first poverty rating in East Java (Maulidah et al., 2022) Ambulu Sub District, Jember District. The research was conducted in watu ulo in Ambulu Sub District, Jember District. the selection of the research location was carried out deliberately (Purposive).

Unlike the (sweet) memories of the water in the above subchapter, many women (living on or near the seas), earn money in nightlife. In “Perempuan Pesisiran” (Sembada, 2018) women are described as passive, the human and nature relationship belongs to men since they never go to the sea to fish; they only watch and wait for the men to come back from the sea (lines 5-7). Natural destruction makes life more difficult, so does advancement. In an unfortunate situation like this, when there is no fish to process, the women take over family responsibility. The north coastal road is the busiest route in Java and the truck drivers that regularly transport goods to and from the

4 provinces along Java Island look for entertainment in the rest areas along the route. Many entertainment workers in the coastal areas of Java admitted that they go to nightlife as a shortcut to their economic problems, not only for their immediate family. With regards to societal change, economic problems may deteriorate human-to-human relationships, as depicted in “Perempuan Pesisiran” (Sembada, 2018) women accepting their fate (line 7). The paradox of the situation is that the women are not allowed to go fishing because its men’s job but they are ‘called’ to provide for the family (and most of the time their extended families) when the men fail to do their share. Human and human relationship changes due to hardship as depicted in the unfortunate situation that befalls women in “Apa Kata Bintang di Laut” (Simatupang, 2017). Therefore, life has always been unfair to those who have no power, for instance, women being victims of unfortunate situations, The coast itself symbolizes human-to-nature relationships, between home and the outside world, or safety and uncertainty.

Being away from the (violent), sea and coasts does not mean fewer social problems. “Kali Martapura” by Hidjaz Yamani (McGlynn et al., 2017) is a poem that carries social criticism of the situation in the river. “The dark brown Martapura River” (line 1) is caused by the soil corrosion from the river banks, although natural heavy rainfalls can cause the water to become brown. The exploitation of nature has contributed to the river water pollution. It does not only happen to the Martapura River, but it also happens in all rivers in Kalimantan. Martapura River that crosses Banjarmasin city has lost its ‘life’ due to continuous construction of the buildings and the new settlements that change not only the environment but also the culture and the people around:

*Di sini tempat perenangan segala yang bertaruh  
pada hidup,  
Seolah-olah tidak pupus liuk-liuk yang  
bermanusia (line 5-6)*

(McGlynn et al., 2017)

“The river carries life challenges,  
A never-ending stream of humanity”

When the poem was composed in 1957, the author had seen the change in the river and the potential natural destruction that might happen to

the river and its surroundings. The massive change of the people's life and the river environment due to constructions and new settlements along the banks. The increase in built-up land around the Martapura River, Banjarmasin City has increased over the last 12 years—the area of built-up land was around 4665 ha in 2010 to 4805 ha in 2014 (Rusdiyanto & Munawir, 2023). The increasing population does not pay attention to the environment although “the lanting-lanting”, “the dukuh-dukuh”, and “the floating market” do exist. They are no longer part of the culture. They are only tourist attractions for those who wish to taste a glimpse of Martapura Rivers. The poem points out sharply his criticism of the situation where the traditional and the culture are difficult to challenge the rapid change of modernity. Although the city seems to be timid, it is eager to become part of the advancement:

*Ohoi dukuh-dukuh berkayuh-kayuhan  
Buah dadanya berkeliaran dalam baju hitam  
Di wajah berkudung sutra-jalang matanya (line  
11-14)*

(McGlynn et al., 2017)

The dukuh-dukuh paddle past,  
Breast bobbing under black blouses.  
Their faces are covered with silk—their eyes  
are wild

The author still wants to keep the past, as long as possible as stated in the last 6 lines—“the wonder in the market”, “bargain with the stall holders”, or “share their generosity”—but he realized that those things would soon belong to the past. Preserving the past for the future is almost impossible, especially when small-scale industry become mass production and when modernization and advancement become inevitable.

## CONCLUSION

Ecocriticism focuses on the links between nature and culture, a bridge between human and nonhuman elements, giving an understanding of environmental thinking. The dynamic quality of the water and its surroundings show the charms of nature as portrayed by Situmorang's “Danau Toba” as the center of the Batak people, Tatengkeng's “Sepantun Laut”, and Damono's “Akulah Si Telaga”. However, natural destruction and societal change show the realities

of the people living alongside the water. “Apa Kata Bintang di Laut” by Iwan Simatupang and “Perempuan Pesisiran” by Iman Sembada, prove societal change, where human is dangerous to other humans, especially to women. Both poems clearly say women were once part of the family and the communities. However, in calamities, they will only live in memories of their lovers “Perempuan Pesisiran” and of her child “Apa Kata Bintang di Laut”. In “Kali Martapura” by Hidjaz Yamani, the rapid change of the environment and the people when it comes to modernization changes the society and the culture leaving only some cultural elements that serve as accessories of the place.

## COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

The author herewith declare that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the data collection, analysis, and editorial process, and the publication process in general. The author also do not have any competing interests regarding the publication in *Poetika: Jurnal Ilmu Sastra*. All authors in this article were not involved in any step of the editorial review and editors' decision at all costs.

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