

## Revealing the Social Criticism in Literary Works: An Objective Study of *Laskar Pelangi* and *The Grapes of Wrath*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the social criticism expressed in two literary works: *Laskar Pelangi* by Andrea Hirata and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. Using a descriptive qualitative method and an objective approach, the study focuses on analyzing intrinsic elements such as themes, characters, and conflicts within the texts. *Laskar Pelangi* portrays the social realities in Belitung, Indonesia, highlighting issues such as social inequality and limited access to education while delivering a message of hope and perseverance through the struggles of underprivileged children. In contrast, *The Grapes of Wrath* captures the hardships faced by migrant farmworker families in the United States during the Great Depression, emphasizing labor exploitation and the importance of social unity. Although the two works emerge from different cultural and historical backgrounds, they converge on the themes of social injustice and the pursuit of societal transformation. The findings demonstrate that literature serves as a powerful medium for articulating social critique and fostering awareness of significant societal issues. This analysis reinforces the role of literary works in illuminating social realities and inspiring critical reflection among readers. The research employs an objective study method to ensure an impartial evaluation of the texts' intrinsic elements.

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### INTRODUCTION

Literature serves as a mirror to society, reflecting the complexities, struggles, and triumphs that define human existence (Brianton, 2023). Through the lens of storytelling, authors often critique societal norms, exposing injustices, inequalities,

and pressing issues (Budiman & Ganap, 2024). Lavery et al., (2019) said social criticism, a powerful literary device, enables writers to challenge prevailing systems, provoke thought, and inspire change. In this regard, Andrea Hirata's *Laskar Pelangi* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* stand out as significant works of literature that address social inequality and human resilience in distinct cultural and historical contexts. This study seeks to explore the social criticisms embedded in these two novels through an objective analysis of their intrinsic elements, including themes, characters, and conflicts.

The study of social criticism in literature has garnered substantial scholarly attention due to its capacity to reveal underlying societal issues. According to Yulisinta et al., (2023), literature functions not only as an art form but also as a social institution that reflects and shapes ideological constructs. Social criticism in literature bridges the gap between creative expression and socio-political discourse, enabling readers to engage with complex issues in a relatable and impactful way (Farihati & Saifuddin, 2024); (Nez, 2022); (Diver & Bradshaw, 2021). Hirata's *Laskar Pelangi*, set in the small island of Belitung, Indonesia, highlights disparities in educational access, economic inequality, and the perseverance of marginalized communities (Fitri, 2024). Meanwhile, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, rooted in the Great Depression of 1930s America, portrays the plight of migrant farmworkers subjected to exploitation, poverty, and systemic injustice (Hu & Hu, 2023). Both texts transcend their immediate contexts to address universal themes of struggle and the pursuit of justice.

The significance of comparing *Laskar Pelangi* and *The Grapes of Wrath* lies in their shared commitment to exposing social realities despite differences in time, geography, and culture, as recommended by (Utami, 2024); (Muthi et al., 2024); (Orosz, 2022). These works present narratives of individuals and communities grappling with systemic oppression, demonstrating how literature can illuminate the human condition across diverse settings. While *Laskar Pelangi* inspires hope and optimism through its portrayal of educational empowerment, *The Grapes of Wrath* emphasizes solidarity and resistance as tools for societal transformation. By examining these works side by side, this study contributes to an enriched understanding of how social criticism operates in literature and its relevance in addressing contemporary issues.

This research employs an objective approach, focusing on intrinsic elements such as themes, characters, and conflicts. As defined by Abrams (1953), an objective approach in literary studies involves analyzing texts independently of external contexts, emphasizing the internal coherence and aesthetic qualities of the work. By adopting this method, the study aims to uncover the structural and thematic parallels between the two novels, demonstrating how their narratives critique societal norms and advocate for change. This approach not only ensures a focused analysis but also highlights the universality of the social issues presented.

The choice of *Laskar Pelangi* and *The Grapes of Wrath* as case studies is informed by their critical acclaim and cultural significance. *Laskar Pelangi*, published in 2005, is celebrated for its heartfelt depiction of children's struggles against educational and economic barriers in Indonesia. The novel's central theme of resilience resonates with readers worldwide, making it a landmark work in contemporary Indonesian literature. Similarly, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, is lauded as a seminal work in American literature, capturing the socioeconomic struggles of the Dust Bowl era (Jenkins, 2022). Its powerful critique of capitalist exploitation and advocacy for social reform remain relevant in discussions of labor rights and economic justice today.

Despite the distinct cultural and historical contexts of these novels, their underlying themes of social inequality and human perseverance offer a valuable basis for comparison. Both works depict characters who confront adversity and challenge societal structures, providing readers with narratives that inspire empathy and critical reflection (Nez, 2022); (Ramadhani & Yusrah, 2023). This study argues that *Laskar Pelangi* and *The Grapes of Wrath* exemplify the transformative power of literature in addressing social issues and fostering a collective consciousness. Through the analyzing their intrinsic elements, the research seeks to uncover how these texts articulate social criticism and promote awareness of inequality and injustice.

Furthermore, the relevance of this study extends beyond literary analysis. In an era marked by increasing global inequality and social unrest, understanding how literature critiques societal norms can inform broader discussions on justice, equity, and change (Yulisinta et al., 2023). By examining the social criticisms in *Laskar Pelangi* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on the role of literature in shaping societal values and fostering social progress. The study also underscores the importance of comparative literary analysis in bridging cultural and temporal divides, highlighting the universality of human struggles and aspirations. This research aims to reveal the social criticism embedded in *Laskar Pelangi* and *The Grapes of Wrath* through an objective analysis of their intrinsic elements. By examining how these novels address issues of inequality, resilience, and social transformation, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of literature as a medium for social critique. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights into the intersection of literature and societal change, demonstrating the enduring relevance of these works in contemporary discussions of justice and equity.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a focus on literary analysis. Using an objective approach, the research examines intrinsic elements of the texts, including themes, characters, and conflicts, to uncover the social criticisms embedded

in Andrea Hirata's *Laskar Pelangi* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The objective approach, as defined by Abrams (1953), prioritizes an in-depth examination of the literary works themselves, independent of external biographical or historical influences, allowing for an unbiased exploration of the texts' internal coherence and thematic significance. The data sources for this study consist of the primary texts, *Laskar Pelangi* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, supplemented by critical reviews, scholarly articles, and relevant literature on social criticism in literary works. Data collection involved close reading and annotation of the novels, identifying recurring themes and patterns related to social inequality, resilience, and systemic injustice. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, focusing on the portrayal of social realities, character development, and narrative conflicts that highlight societal issues. Comparative analysis was also employed to draw connections and contrasts between the two novels, emphasizing their shared commitment to addressing social inequalities across differing cultural and historical contexts. Findings are presented thematically, supported by textual evidence from the primary works.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Findings*

#### *Socio-Economic Inequality*

Both novels, *Laskar Pelangi* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, provide a real picture of the socio-economic inequality experienced by marginalized groups. In *Laskar Pelangi*, Andrea Hirata explores social inequality on Belitung Island, an area rich in natural resources but the majority of whose population lives in poverty. The wealth of tin mining is controlled by large companies, while local people, especially native Malays, only get a little benefit. The setting of the 1970s to 1980s shows how the economic system at that time failed to distribute wealth fairly, creating a wide gap between the elite class and the working class. The children in this novel, like Lintang, become indirect victims of a system that does not side with the lower classes, where access to quality education is almost impossible to achieve. The Muhammadiyah School is a symbol of the struggle of children from poor families to get a decent education. The inequality between the elite schools owned by mining companies and the simple Muhammadiyah schools highlights the injustice in the distribution of resources.

*"The walls of our school are rotten, almost collapsed, and the roof tiles are leaking here and there"*

This dialogue describes how bad the physical condition of the Muhammadiyah school is as a place of study for poor children compared to other

schools that have luxurious facilities. The analysis process shows that the simple physical description of the Muhammadiyah school and the struggles of the teachers and students are a direct reflection of the existing inequality. In addition, the family life of Lintang, Ikal, and other members of Laskar Pelangi reflect the harsh struggle of the lower class in the midst of the exploitation of natural resources by large companies.

*"Lintang has to pedal his bicycle for tens of kilometers every day just to get to school. The road is muddy and full of danger"*

This shows Lintang's hard struggle as a child from a poor family to access education. "The people of our village are only manual laborers in the mines, while the rich live in big houses with air conditioning. This narrative criticizes the striking economic inequality between the local community and those who utilize natural resources in Belitung. The conflicts faced by the characters in meeting basic needs are a form of criticism of the unfair economic structure.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck depicts the broader socio-economic crisis of the Great Depression in the United States. Inequality is seen through the exploitation of tenant farmers like the Joads by large corporations and banks that seize their land.

*"The bank-the monster has to have profits all the time. It can't wait. It'll die."*

This conversation shows how the bank is seen as a "monster" that is constantly chasing profits without regard for the impact on the tenant farmers' lives. *"If a man owns a little property, that property is him, it's part of him, and it's like him."* This dialogue implies how important land is to the tenant farmers' identity and dignity, which is destroyed when their land is taken away by an unfair economic system.

"They're working away at our spirits. They're trying to make us cringe and crawl like a whipped bitch. They're trying to break us." This line reveals how farmers feel oppressed and manipulated by large economic forces, such as banks and agribusiness. "The tractors came over the roads and into the fields, great crawlers moving like insects. This narrative depicts the tractor as a symbol of inhumane modernization, displacing tenant families for the benefit of large corporations.

Despite moving to California, they face an unfair economic system, where labor is exploited with low wages, "They say they're paying twenty-five cents an hour, but when you get there, there's a thousand men. And each man gets a little piece of it." This statement reveals how large corporations take advantage of the abundant availability of labor to keep wages as low as possible while large corporations enjoy manifold profits, "The more we give, the less we have. It doesn't make no sense." This dialogue reflects the frustration of farm workers who feel that the results of their hard work only benefit the owners of large corporations. This inequality shows the destructive impact of uncontrolled capitalism on the lower class.

This novel depicts the injustice experienced by migrant farm workers who are forced to work for low wages by large landowners. Analysis of the conflicts in the text, such as the tension between workers and landowners, confirms the reality of economic exploitation. Some of these tensions are depicted in the following sentence excerpt in the novel "You gonna need us. And we're gonna organize. We're gonna fight for better wages." This statement reflects the threat that the workers pose to the landowners, who continue to oppress them with low wages. "They got guards with guns, and they'll use 'em. Don't you try to fight."

This conversation shows how the landowners use military force to oppress the workers who try to fight for their rights. "Why do we got to live like this? Them rich fellas eat good, sleep good, while we're here starving." This sentence expresses the workers' despair at the inequality they experience compared to the comfort of the landowners' lives.

Steinbeck criticizes the capitalist economic system that creates a gap between the owner and worker classes. Descriptions of the environment, such as the slums of migrant workers compared to the luxurious properties of the landowners, become narrative devices to show this inequality. "In the camps, the shacks were built of old tin and cardboard, leaning together for strength. Dust sifted through the cracks, and the smell of despair hung in the air." This description shows the very poor living conditions of migrant workers, who live in makeshift huts with minimal facilities. In contrast, "The big houses sat on the hills, with green lawns and shining cars in the driveways. Inside, the rooms were filled with fine furniture and chandeliers that sparkled." These two sentences emphasize the stark contrast between the luxury of the landowners and the poverty of the workers. So there are statements that reflect the frustration and dissatisfaction of the workers with the inequality they experience. "Why do they get to live up there, with everything, while we're left with nothing but dirt and hunger?"... "They take the crops we pick and sell them for a fortune, while we can't even afford to feed our kids." This dialogue illustrates how farm workers feel exploited by landowners who take huge profits from their hard work.

### ***Access to Education and Basic Rights***

Education as a tool for social liberation is a central theme in Laskar Pelangi, while *The Grapes of Wrath* highlights the importance of access to basic rights, such as land, work, and a living wage, in line with (Rizkina & Sumayah, 2023). In Laskar Pelangi, the Muhammadiyah Elementary School is a symbol of resistance against systemic injustice. Despite its limitations, this school is a place where working-class children can dream and go beyond the limits imposed by poverty. Andrea Hirata reminds us that education is not only a right, but also an important tool to escape the cycle of poverty.

*"Mrs. Mus said, 'Education is a weapon to fight poverty.' We all believe it, even though we know the road to achieving it is full of obstacles."*

This dialogue illustrates the children's hopes of improving their fate through education even though they are in a state of deprivation. Laskar Pelangi highlights education as a tool of empowerment to fight injustice (Fitri, 2024). Characters such as Lintang and Ikal show how the spirit of learning can inspire social change. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family's struggle illustrates the importance of basic rights for a decent life. Access to land as a source of livelihood and employment with fair wages are key issues. "The landlord and the tenants are not in the same world, nor do they live by the same rules." This quote illustrates the inequality between landowners and farm workers, who often do not have equal access to resources and a decent life. Steinbeck shows how these shortcomings exacerbate the conditions of migrant farmers, creating a cycle of powerlessness that is difficult to overcome without systemic change. Informal education through lived experience and solidarity among working-class people become ways to combat exploitation.

### ***Methods of Delivering Social Criticism***

Both authors use different narrative methods to deliver social criticism, but both are equally effective in building empathy in the reader.

### ***Laskar Pelangi***

Andrea Hirata uses a light, humorous, and optimistic writing style. Through a dreamy children's story, he creates a narrative that inspires readers to care about education and social justice issues.

*"Suddenly he said in a loud voice, 'Good morning, children of Laskar Pelangi!' It turned out that the voice belonged to Mrs. Mus, our teacher. Suddenly our hearts trembled at the same time. It felt like the voice of a fairy that brought us to a fairy tale world."*

Here, the author describes the atmosphere in a light and cheerful way, as if every moment was full of magic. The light writing style makes the reader feel as if they are joining the world of these enthusiastic children.

*"Books are windows to the world. We bought our first book by saving money from selling cassava chips. We felt like rich people buying something very expensive."*

This quote shows humor and optimism. Even though they have to struggle to buy books, they still feel proud and full of enthusiasm, which highlights optimism despite limitations, align with (Pusposari, 2023). "Adults always say, 'Don't dream too high, you'll fall.' But we believe, the higher the tree grows, the bigger the fruit."

This sentence illustrates hopeful optimism. The light and easy-to-understand language style gives the impression that even though they live in difficult conditions, these children are still enthusiastic and believe in a bright future.

*"Mrs. Mus is the coolest teacher. She teaches us in a way that we never imagined before. She not only teaches us lessons, but also makes us feel like the chosen ones."* The humor contained in this sentence comes from the way Ikal admires Mrs. Mus in a simple and warm way, depicting the light side of the story despite the challenges they must face. This approach makes it easier for readers to reflect on serious issues without feeling too burdened.

### *The Grapes of Wrath*

John Steinbeck uses a social realism approach with detailed and emotional descriptions (Mackenthun, 2023). He describes the suffering of the Joad family directly, without hiding the cruelty of the economic system at that time. "The sun was gone, and the moon was rising in the east. The dust hung like a fog over the valley. And the wind, relentless, poured its brown dirt, as if it were a curse from a god, onto the backs of men and women who no longer could lift their heads in the face of it." This description depicts a harsh, dusty, and unfriendly environment. Steinbeck uses the surrounding nature as a reflection of the hardships and suffering experienced by farmers who lost their land.

*"The land is not your land, and the land is not your work. And now you're being driven off of it, and your hands are empty, and you've got no more hope".*

Here, Steinbeck emphasizes the harsh reality that farmers who have worked their land for a long time now have to lose everything. This description highlights the deep sense of loss and injustice they experience, creating a strong sense of empathy among the reader.

*"The machine men, the men with the money, the ones with the power, they will drive you off, and they'll drive you down into the ground. But you won't die. You'll just be defeated, and that is what makes them strong, their ability to make you feel small".*

In this quote, Steinbeck depicts the inequality between the working class and the capitalists. This highly emotional description shows how the cornered farmers feel crushed by the oppressive system, but still survive despite being physically and mentally destroyed.

*"The great owners who have learned to drive the tenant farmers from their land are interested in one thing: to grow rich. They have no concern for the human costs",* (chapter 18). Steinbeck strongly reveals the indifference of the big landowners to human

suffering, align with (Kuehn, 2022). This is a sharp critique of the economic system that only focuses on material gain without regard for the social impact that destroys the lives of others. "And the people who had been beaten down were rising up, not in anger, but with the strength of the soil itself. They were rising up to be more than just cogs in a machine, to become more than the system had allowed them to be", (Chapter 22).

In this passage, Steinbeck depicts the fighting spirit and rise that comes from injustice. Although they have been treated like disposable parts of a machine, these people show incredible strength and resilience. Through deep and emotional descriptions, Steinbeck depicts the hardships faced by the downtrodden farmers, and the injustices they experience under an exploitative social and economic system, similar to (Carlock, 2024). The social realism approach in *The Grapes of Wrath* provides a powerful and moving picture of the lives of marginalized people. This method creates a deep sense of empathy while simultaneously arousing the reader's anger at injustice.

### *Solidarity as a Tool of Resistance*

Both also emphasize the importance of solidarity in facing injustice, although in different ways.

#### *Laskar Pelangi*

In *Laskar Pelangi*, solidarity is seen in the close relationship between school friends who support each other to face limitations. Their friendship becomes the main strength to survive and dream in the midst of unfavorable conditions.

*"Ikal and Lintang looked at each other. In their hearts they both whispered, 'We will continue to fight.' Even though the world is difficult, they know that their strength lies in togetherness. No matter how hard it is, they must continue to dream"*

In this quote, we can see how Ikal and Lintang provide each other with moral support. They understand that even though everything feels difficult, they will not give up because they have friends who are always there for each other. "Bu Mus always said, 'Laskar Pelangi, you are the light that must shine. No one can extinguish you, if you support each other.' That sentence never left our minds, and we always hold on to it." Mrs. Mus, as a caring teacher, encourages them to maintain their spirits and continue to fight together. Their solidarity becomes the main force that drives them to survive, even when they face various obstacles.

*"Although our school does not have many facilities, we feel rich. Because we have one thing that cannot be bought with money, which is friendship. And that friendship makes us strong, makes us survive"*

This shows that even though they live in limitations, the strong bond of friendship between them brings happiness and strength to face all difficulties, align with (Segaran, 2024). Friendship becomes a source of energy that keeps them optimistic and keeps trying. "We don't have much, but we give to each other. When one of us needs help, the others always come. That's what keeps us intact, remains an inseparable unit." This quote shows how each member of Laskar Pelangi shares what they have, be it knowledge, time, or spirit. Their solidarity is not only in words, but also in real actions that help them survive. Through this close relationship, Laskar Pelangi teaches that friendship and solidarity are extraordinary strengths in the face of difficulties. Even though the conditions they face are not easy, they can still dream and fight together, supporting each other.

### ***The Grapes of Wrath***

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, solidarity emerges on a larger scale, namely between the working class. Steinbeck emphasizes that change can only happen if workers unite to fight against the system that oppresses them, supported by (Nesakumari & Nagalakshmi, 2024). This theme is evident in the character of Tom Joad, who ultimately chooses to fight for workers' rights as part of a collective movement.

*"In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage. And when the people get their strength and rise, the system will not be able to stop them"*

This sentence illustrates how the injustice they experience continually fosters a sense of anger and collective consciousness. Solidarity emerges as a form of strength to fight against the system that oppresses them. In this context, change is considered possible only if workers unite in their struggle. "The poor have always been with us, and they will always be with us. But the question is, will we let them suffer? Will we let them starve? Or will we rise together and change the world?"

Here, the characters in the story begin to realize that their hardships are not just individual problems, but larger social problems. Solidarity among the working class is crucial because change can only be achieved if they come together to fight an unjust system.

*"There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the struggle, all part of the fight, and if we don't stand together, we'll never win"*

In this quote, the main characters talk about how their work and struggles are part of something bigger: the fight for social change. By coming together, they can overcome their hardships and fight the system that oppresses them. "And the people listened, and the people heard. And the people spoke, 'We'll go with you, we'll work with you. We'll stand beside you.'" In this passage, solidarity among the workers begins to form as they realize that they must come together to confront the larger forces that oppress them. Although they were previously separated and facing their own hardships, they begin to recognize the collective power that can be created by working together. *"The people come together, they form an army, they rise up. They are no longer just poor folk; they are a movement, a collective force that cannot be stopped."*

In this section, it is clearly reflected that change will only occur if workers join together in greater solidarity. They are no longer just separate individuals, but a whole that has the potential to fight oppression.

Through the characters of Ma Joad and Tom Joad, the novel emphasizes the importance of solidarity and collective resistance to face oppression. "Why, Tom, we're the people that live. They can't wipe us out. They can't lick us. We'll go on forever, Tom, 'cause we're the people." This statement emphasizes Ma Joad's belief that the strength of the people lies in their resilience and solidarity in the face of injustice. "A fellow ain't got a soul of his own, just a little piece of a big soul – the one big soul that belongs to everybody... I'll be everywhere – wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there." In this dialogue, Tom voices the concept of collective resistance and solidarity, which reflects the spirit of struggle to fight against the system of oppression. Ma Joad: "We got to stick together, all of us. We can't afford to fight amongst ourselves. That's how they win, by keeping us apart."

Tom Joad: *"You're right, Ma. If we don't stand together, we don't stand a chance."* This dialogue illustrates the characters' awareness that divisions among the workers will only strengthen the oppressive position of the landowners. The author uses dialogue and character development to show how solidarity is key in the struggle against injustice. Through these quotes, *The Grapes of Wrath* emphasizes that solidarity between the working class is the key to changing the system that oppresses them. Steinbeck illustrates that collective strength, not individualism, will provide hope and a way out of the suffering they experience.

### ***Global and Cross-Cultural Relevance***

Both novels, while different in geographical and temporal contexts, have strong relevance in a global context. Laskar Pelangi speaks about the importance of education in developing countries as a tool to break the chain of poverty, supported

by (Martorell & Roig Telo, 2023). This message is relevant to many countries that are still grappling with the issue of equal access to education.

The Grapes of Wrath raises the issue of economic inequality, which remains a global challenge. In the era of globalization, labor exploitation, mass migration, and unequal access to resources are growing problems. Both teach that the struggle against social injustice requires courage, solidarity, and collective awareness, which makes these works still relevant and powerful today.

### ***Literary Works as a Subtle Medium of Social Criticism***

Mackenthun, (2023) stated that "Literary works are used to describe what the author captures about life around him. Literature is like a portrait or sketch of life. The ability of literature to convey messages also makes it a means of social criticism". Literary works are often used as a means to voice criticism of the injustice of the system in society. With a subtle approach, the author can convey a profound message without having to speak directly, thus inviting readers to reflect on the social issues raised. In Laskar Pelangi and The Grapes of Wrath, social criticism is conveyed through events, characters, and symbols that represent the conditions of society at that time.

### ***Using Provocative Events***

#### ***Lintang's Struggle in Laskar Pelangi***

Lintang is a genius child from a poor family who lives far from school. Every day, he has to cycle across a risky road just to reach Muhammadiyah Elementary School. When he finally has to drop out of school due to family responsibilities, readers are shown how a social system that does not support access to education prevents talented children from developing their potential.

*"I have to continue my education, Mrs. Mus. My father and mother don't have much, but they always say, 'Knowledge is the only thing that people can't take away.' I have to be able to continue their dreams"*

Here, Lintang shows a strong determination to continue his education even though his family lives in limitations. His family's sacrifices are a great motivation for him to continue studying. "Ikal, you know, I have to wake up very early in the morning, walk a long way to school. But I don't want to give up. Even though many don't believe I can, I will prove it."

Lintang talks to Ikal about the difficulties he faces on his way to school, such as the long distance and difficult conditions. However, he remains determined to continue his education even though he has to struggle hard.

*"I can't choose, Mrs. Mus. My father is sick, my mother is no longer here. I have to help them. But I also don't want to stop studying. I have to be able to survive"*

Lintang has to choose between working to help his family and continuing his education. Here, he shows how difficult the choice is, but he still tries hard to maintain his educational dream. "Mrs. Mus, I want to be someone who can change my family's fate. I want to be a better person, who can help others. Please don't stop teaching me." Lintang speaks with hope to Mrs. Mus. Despite all the difficulties he faces, he continues to try to learn and hopes to achieve his greater ideals, to change his life and family's circumstances.

*"But, Ikal, what if I fail? What if I can't live up to their expectations? Everyone expects me to be the best, but I'm also a human being who can fall"*

Lintang shares his doubts with Ikal, realizing how great the expectations of the people around him are. Despite feeling pressured, he still does not give up on his dream of changing his fate through education.

Lintang's struggle in Laskar Pelangi reflects his never-give-up spirit and strong determination to achieve his dreams despite facing many challenges. These dialogues illustrate how important education is to him and how he continues to struggle even though his life is full of limitations. Through Lintang's story, Andrea Hirata subtly criticizes the injustice in the distribution of education in Indonesia, especially in remote areas.

### ***The Joad Family's Struggle in The Grapes of Wrath***

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family's struggle to survive and fight social injustice is the center of the story. Tom Joad: "I been thinkin' about this here road. It's a long one, and we don't know how long it is. You know what I mean?. Jim Casy: "Yeah, I know. But you gotta keep on movin'. Gotta keep goin' down the road, or you'll get stuck." This conversation shows how the Joad family, especially Tom, must keep moving and struggling amidst uncertainty and hardship. Jim Casy, who was once a minister, advises them that even though their journey is long and challenging, they should not stop.

Farmer: "I ain't got no choice, Mister. I got to sell the land. They're takin' it from me anyways, so I might as well take the money." Tom Joad: "It ain't right. You work that land your whole life, and now you got no say in it. But you gotta do what you gotta do to survive." This conversation shows the desperation felt by farmers who are forced to sell their land because of an unfair system. The Joad family, like many others, have to face the harsh reality that their land is no longer theirs.

Ma Joad: "We got to go. We got to keep goin'. We're a family, and we can stick together. We can make it through if we stay together. This conversation shows Ma Joad's determination to keep her family together. Although the journey to California is full of uncertainty and challenges, Ma Joad believes that family solidarity is the key to survival. Tom Joad: "Well, there ain't no use in fightin'. But I ain't gonna take it no more. They push us too far, and now it's time to fight back." Jim Casy: "I been thinkin' about that. If we all got together, we'd be strong enough to make 'em listen. But it's gotta be all of us." This conversation illustrates Tom Joad and Jim Casy's awareness of the importance of solidarity among migrant workers. They realize that only by uniting can they fight the system that oppresses them.

In one scene in the migrant camp, the Joad family tries to find work but is only offered very low wages. The children are starving, while the landowners enjoy the fruits of their labor. This incident illustrates the systemic exploitation of migrant workers. Tom Joad: "Well, we got here an' we ain't got no work. They offer us work but they payin' such a damn low wage, we can't live on it." Man at the camp: "They say they can't pay no more. The owners don't want us to have a decent living. They want us to be hungry and desperate, so we'll work for anything."

Tom Joad: "That's right. They want to break us down, make us desperate enough to take anything. But we're not gonna let 'em win." Ma Joad (to the children):

"Don't worry, honey. We'll find something. You just gotta hang on. We're family, and as long as we're together, we'll make it through." Here, the conversation between Tom Joad and the other workers reflects the frustration and desperation felt by the migrants. They toil for barely enough to survive, while the wealthier landowners continue to profit from their labors. Meanwhile, Ma Joad tries to comfort her hungry children, reminding them that despite the hardships, family is the force that will help them survive.

Ma Joad: "We're the people. We're the people who work, who keep things going. We won't stop, and we won't give up." Here, Ma Joad speaks with conviction that despite the hardships and injustices they face, they are an unstoppable force. The Joad family's solidarity and struggle reflect their belief that they can survive despite the odds.

Through these conversations, *The Grapes of Wrath* depicts the Joad family's struggle against poverty, social injustice, and hardship. Their determination and sense of solidarity are the main sources of strength in the long and challenging journey they face. Steinbeck does not directly blame capitalism, but through these descriptions, he invites the reader to reflect on the negative effects of an unjust economic system.

### *Through Characters Representing Oppressed Groups*

Ms. Muslimah in Laskar Pelangi, the Muslimah teacher is a symbol of dedication and resistance against the injustice of the education system, in line with (Fitri, 2024). Even though she has very limited resources, she still teaches with passion, believing that education is the key to change. Her presence illustrates how simple individuals can fight an unfair system, even on a small scale.

### ***Tom Joad in The Grapes of Wrath***

Tom Joad, who initially only cared about his family, develops into a symbol of collective struggle. When he states that he will always be where the oppressed struggle, he not only criticizes the exploitative economic system but also calls for solidarity as a tool to fight injustice. This character becomes a medium for Steinbeck to voice hopes for social change without directly attacking certain parties.

### ***Utilizing Symbolism***

#### ***Muhammadiyah Elementary School in Laskar Pelangi***

This small school is a symbol of the injustice of the education system in remote areas. Its almost collapsed condition reflects how the education sector is often neglected, especially for the poor. *"This school is nothing more than an old building that is almost collapsing. The roof is leaking, the walls are cracked, and many of the chairs are broken. But, even so, this is our home, where we study and dream"*. In this conversation, Ikal describes how simple and damaged their school building is. However, despite its condition, the school still has great meaning for them, because it is where they get their education and the opportunity to develop. Andrea Hirata does not explicitly blame the government, but he describes this situation so vividly that readers can feel the urgency of improving the education system.

### ***Grapes as a Symbol in The Grapes of Wrath***

The title The Grapes of Wrath refers to "grapes" which are supposed to symbolize hope and prosperity. However, in this novel, the symbolism of grapes reflects the anger, suffering, and exploitation experienced by migrant farmers. The title of the novel itself comes from the song "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," which mentions "the grapes of wrath," referring to the mounting anger against social injustice. *"Grapes. Big, purple grapes hangin' heavy on the vines. They could feed us all, but they let 'em rot so they can keep the prices high. And the kids – our kids – starve while the juice drips into the earth. That's the anger. That's the wrath. Them grapes are growin' big and heavy, but they're not growin' for us. They're growin' to fill the pockets of them that already got more'n enough."*

The symbolism of grapes in this conversation and narrative reflects a great irony: the fruit that should be a symbol of abundance instead becomes a symbol of

anger and suffering. The rotting grapes represent the injustice of an economic system that prioritizes profit over human needs, as well as the suffering of migrant farmers who are exploited and left to starve. Their “wrath” peaks along with this injustice, and the grapes become a symbol of their resistance to exploitation. Steinbeck subtly shows this irony to criticize the empty promises of a capitalist system that never really provides prosperity for all.

### *Emotional and Reflective Delivery of Criticism*

Both novels do not provide social criticism directly or confrontationally, but rather through the experiences of characters that trigger empathy in readers. In Laskar Pelangi, scenes such as the children's simple celebration after winning a quiz show that dreams and hopes can emerge even in limitations. However, behind the joy, there is a message that depicts social inequality that limits the potential of talented children. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the depiction of a child dying of starvation creates a moment of deep reflection on how a broken system can destroy an individual's life. Steinbeck does not need to mention a specific party to make readers aware of the problems faced by migrant farmers.

### *Similarities and Differences*

Similarities: Both works highlight social and economic inequality as the main problem. Both Andrea Hirata and John Steinbeck present characters who fight against injustice with courage and solidarity. Through the analysis of themes and conflicts, it can be seen that both use strong narrative elements to voice social criticism. Differences: Laskar Pelangi is more optimistic and inspiring, while *The Grapes of Wrath* tends to be tragic and full of anger towards an oppressive system. This difference is seen in the narrative tone and ending that emphasizes hope versus suffering.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study reveals the profound social criticisms embedded in Andrea Hirata's *Laskar Pelangi* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, demonstrating how literature serves as a powerful medium for addressing societal issues. Both novels, though originating from vastly different cultural and historical contexts, converge on themes of social inequality, systemic oppression, and the human struggle for justice and dignity. Through an objective analysis of their intrinsic elements, such as themes, characters, and conflicts, the research underscores how these works critique societal norms and advocate for change. Laskar Pelangi highlights the harsh realities of social

and educational inequalities in Indonesia, portraying the struggles of marginalized communities in Belitung to access basic education. The narrative's optimistic tone and its celebration of resilience and perseverance inspire hope and underscore the transformative potential of education in breaking cycles of poverty. Conversely, *The Grapes of Wrath* presents a more somber narrative, chronicling the suffering of migrant farmworkers during the Great Depression in the United States. Steinbeck's critique of labor exploitation and advocacy for social solidarity resonate with ongoing discussions on economic disparity and workers' rights.

By juxtaposing these two works, the study demonstrates that social criticism in literature transcends temporal and geographical boundaries. Both novels not only reflect the conditions of their respective eras but also challenge readers to confront contemporary issues of inequality and justice. This comparison highlights the universality of human struggles, emphasizing literature's role in fostering empathy and inspiring societal transformation. On top of that, the study reaffirms the power of literature as a tool for social critique. Through the illuminating societal flaws and envisioning pathways for change, works like *Laskar Pelangi* and *The Grapes of Wrath* remain timeless in their relevance, encouraging readers to reflect on and address pressing social issues. Future research could explore the reception of social criticism in *Laskar Pelangi* and *The Grapes of Wrath* across different cultural and educational settings. Examining how readers from various backgrounds interpret and respond to the social messages in these novels could provide deeper insights into the transformative potential of literature in shaping societal values and fostering cross-cultural understanding.

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