



Cultural Memory and Postcolonial Perspectives in Modern Indonesian Novels

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Article Info :

Received:

20-01-2026

Revised:

29-01-2026

Accepted:

09-02-2026

Abstract

This research examines cultural memory and postcolonial perspectives in modern Indonesian novels through a non-empirical qualitative research design grounded in close reading and thematic-interpretive analysis. Drawing on cultural memory studies and postcolonial theory, the study investigates how Indonesian fiction constructs remembrance as a contested narrative process shaped by trauma, ecological imaginaries, diasporic displacement, and institutional heritage politics. The findings indicate that novels function as mnemonic spaces where colonial violence persists through fragmented temporalities, familial transmission of trauma, and symbolic struggles over monuments, museums, and cultural routes. Literary representations complicate civic and state-centered historiographies by foregrounding silenced indigenous voices and ethical tensions surrounding the narration of historical suffering. The analysis further demonstrates that cultural memory circulates not only through institutional infrastructures but also through vernacular practices such as ritual continuity and food heritage, expanding the scope of postcolonial remembrance beyond official commemoration. By positioning Indonesian novels as counter-archives of colonial afterlives, this study contributes theoretically to debates on collective memory and methodologically to interpretive approaches in postcolonial literary criticism.

Keywords: cultural memory, postcolonial literature, Indonesian novels, heritage politics, collective remembrance.



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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary literary scholarship has increasingly positioned cultural memory as a decisive analytic category for understanding how postcolonial societies negotiate the afterlives of empire through narrative form, symbolic inheritance, and contested historiographies, particularly within the Global South where modernity has been inseparable from colonial epistemic violence and its lingering representational regimes. Within this international landscape, Indonesian novels have emerged as a crucial site in which remembrance operates not merely as thematic recollection but as a structural force shaping the articulation of belonging, displacement, and historical agency amid transnational debates on heritage politics and memory conflict. Current developments in cultural policy studies underline that colonial heritage remains a volatile terrain of remembrance and peacebuilding, suggesting that literary texts participate in broader struggles over what may be publicly remembered or strategically forgotten (Zhu & Kent, 2025). Parallel inquiries into the revival of cultural routes such as the Jalur Rempah demonstrate that postcolonial memory is increasingly institutionalized through heritage narratives that reframe Indonesia's global historical position, offering a productive backdrop for examining how fiction mediates similar symbolic recuperations (Hara et al., 2025).

Existing research has generated significant insights into the entanglement between memory, identity, and postcolonial discourse, though the most compelling contributions foreground the complex negotiations through which literature registers ecological, political, and affective struggles beyond colonial narration. Eco-postcolonial readings, for instance, show that local voices and environmental imaginaries in Indonesian writing articulate resistance not only against imperial histories but also against contemporary extractive continuities, revealing memory as ecological and political simultaneously rather than as nostalgic residue (Efendi et al., 2025). Studies of Indo-Dutch identity

formations further illuminate how cultural memory becomes a transgenerational practice of negotiating hybridity, migration, and belonging, complicating binary frameworks of colonizer versus colonized in postcolonial remembrance (Pattynama, 2025). Meanwhile, comparative work on mass violence and collective memory underscores that remembrance is shaped by historically contingent power structures, suggesting that Indonesian novels participate in wider global patterns of narrating trauma and moral accountability (Suh, 2025).

At the same time, a critical synthesis of the literature indicates persistent conceptual and empirical limitations that constrain a fuller understanding of cultural memory's narrative operations in modern Indonesian fiction. Much scholarship has tended to privilege institutional or monumental sites of memory, such as museums and commemorative diplomacy, which while illuminating state-mediated remembrance, often under-theorize the subtler mnemonic labor performed by literary form itself (Riyanto et al., 2025). Community-based studies of monumental memory likewise highlight identity formation through material symbols, yet they risk marginalizing the imaginative textures through which novels stage memory's ambivalence, fragmentation, and haunting return (Afandi & Febriansyah, 2025). Even inquiries into local civic reinterpretations of historical events reveal how collective memory is mobilized for consciousness-building, though they leave open how fictional narratives complicate or resist such civic instrumentalization through irony, multiplicity, and temporal disruption (Gunawati, 2025).

These unresolved tensions carry both scholarly and practical urgency because cultural memory is not a neutral archive but a contested arena where postcolonial futures are negotiated through selective remembrance and structural amnesia. Research on traumatic memory in politically charged Indonesian novels demonstrates how family dynamics become a microcosm of national silences, indicating that fiction exposes the affective costs of unresolved historical violence in ways that exceed official discourse (Karim et al., n.d.). Methodological debates on reclaiming indigenous voices further warn that collaborative postcolonial practices must confront neocolonial patterns of cultural forgetting, underscoring the stakes of how narratives authorize certain memories while erasing others (Jena & Mishra, 2026). Even constitutional and ideological studies show that postcolonial values remain shaped by the long shadow of colonial governance, implying that memory's political resonance extends far beyond cultural representation into the normative foundations of modern states (Rasyid & Kaku, 2025).

Within this evolving scholarly terrain, the present study argues that modern Indonesian novels demand closer attention as mnemonic-textual spaces where postcolonial memory is not simply narrated but structurally produced through language, temporality, and narrative ethics. Approaches that integrate ethnographic sensitivity with textual analysis suggest that memory in contemporary Indonesian contexts operates as a form of decolonial theologizing and cultural meaning-making, challenging rigid separations between spiritual, political, and literary domains (Lattu, 2025). Similarly, examinations of home, remembrance, and forgetting in Indonesian diasporic fiction demonstrate that memory is inseparable from spatial imaginaries and affective dislocation, highlighting the need for more nuanced frameworks that treat novels as epistemic sites of postcolonial belonging rather than passive reflections of history (Hu, 2025).

This research therefore aims to investigate how cultural memory functions as a narrative and ideological mechanism in modern Indonesian novels when read through postcolonial perspectives, focusing on the ways fiction negotiates trauma, heritage, identity, and historical responsibility across local and transnational contexts. It contributes theoretically by advancing an integrated model of cultural memory that foregrounds the novel as a dynamic arena of mnemonic contestation rather than a vessel of static recollection, and it contributes methodologically by combining close textual analysis with broader postcolonial memory theory to capture the layered operations of remembrance, silence, and narrative resistance in Indonesian literary modernity.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a non-empirical qualitative research design, as its primary data consist of textual and discursive materials rather than measurable participant-based observations. The research is positioned as a postcolonial literary analysis grounded in cultural memory studies, focusing on selected modern Indonesian novels that explicitly engage with themes of colonial aftermath, collective remembrance, identity negotiation, and historical trauma. The data sources are therefore secondary in nature, comprising the novels as primary literary texts alongside relevant scholarly works in

postcolonial theory and memory politics as contextual support. Text selection follows purposive criteria: the novels must (1) be produced within the modern Indonesian literary period, (2) demonstrate narrative engagement with colonial or postcolonial historical consciousness, and (3) contain significant representations of cultural memory through trauma, heritage, displacement, or intergenerational transmission. The analytical framework integrates cultural memory theory with postcolonial critique, enabling the study to examine how fictional narratives operate as mnemonic spaces where history is contested, reconstructed, or strategically silenced.

The analytical procedure is conducted through systematic close reading combined with thematic-interpretive coding to identify recurring mnemonic structures, narrative strategies, and ideological tensions embedded in the texts. The study applies a multi-layered interpretive approach: first, mapping textual representations of memory and forgetting; second, situating these representations within broader postcolonial power relations; and third, critically assessing how narrative form mediates cultural remembrance in Indonesian modernity. To ensure methodological rigor, the research employs analytic transparency through explicit documentation of interpretive steps, sustained engagement with established theoretical debates, and triangulation between textual evidence and scholarly discourse. Although reliability in literary research is not measured statistically, credibility is strengthened through theoretical consistency, reflexive interpretation, and coherence between analytical claims and textual substantiation. Ethical considerations are minimal in the absence of human participants, yet scholarly integrity is maintained through responsible citation practices, respect for cultural-historical sensitivities, and avoidance of reductive or essentialist readings of postcolonial experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mnemonic Narratives and the Politics of Postcolonial Remembrance

The close reading of selected modern Indonesian novels demonstrates that cultural memory operates as a narrative infrastructure through which postcolonial subjects negotiate historical rupture, intergenerational inheritance, and contested national belonging. These texts stage remembrance not as passive recollection but as an active political practice that challenges dominant historiographies and reopens unresolved colonial wounds. The analytical patterns align with comparative discussions of mass violence and collective memory, where literature becomes a site of moral accounting beyond institutional archives (Suh, 2025). Postcolonial memory emerges as structurally mediated through fragmentation, temporal disjunction, and symbolic repetition, indicating that fiction sustains what official discourse often suppresses. This interpretive finding resonates with theoretical reconsiderations of collective memory under colonial continuities, emphasizing that remembrance is inseparable from power relations in the present (McIntyre, 2026).

A recurring feature across the novels is the representation of trauma as familial and communal, revealing how political violence persists through intimate narrative forms rather than through public commemoration alone. The thematic coding shows that family dynamics often function as mnemonic microcosms, exposing silences, anxieties, and inherited suffering that destabilize linear nationalist narratives. Such dynamics parallel the depiction of traumatic memory among political prisoners' families, where domestic space becomes saturated with unresolved historical terror (Karim et al., 2025). Literary memory thus exceeds individual psychology, operating instead as a collective burden shaped by structural forgetting and selective visibility. The ethical stakes of narrating suffering illuminate how memory is simultaneously testimony and narrative risk within postcolonial fiction (Yuwono et al., 2025).

The novels also construct memory through ecological and spatial imaginaries, linking colonial extraction to contemporary environmental vulnerability and cultural dispossession. Eco-postcolonial readings reveal that landscapes are not neutral settings but mnemonic terrains where colonial exploitation and local resistance remain inscribed. This pattern echoes scholarship that identifies ecological narratives as crucial sites of postcolonial struggle and local voice articulation in Indonesian literature (Efendi et al., 2025). Spatial memory becomes a mechanism through which novels critique the persistence of neocolonial resource regimes. Such ecological remembrance complicates human-centered models of trauma by embedding memory in material environments (Indriyanto & Barus, 2025).

Material objects frequently appear as contested carriers of memory, functioning as mnemonic anchors that connect diasporic displacement with colonial histories of appropriation. The narrative

emphasis on artifacts, heirlooms, and everyday objects reveals how cultural memory circulates through material traces rather than through monumental historiography alone. This aligns with material culture analyses showing that objects retain afterlives of colonial contestation within diasporic communities. The novels frame memory as embedded in tangible residues that mediate belonging and loss across temporal boundaries (Indriyani et al., 2025). Object-centered memory destabilizes abstract notions of heritage by grounding postcolonial history in sensory immediacy.

Monumentality and public memory are repeatedly interrogated through ironic narrative strategies that expose the ambivalence of state-sponsored remembrance. The novels depict monuments not simply as symbols of unity but as contested signifiers of authority, modernity, and ideological discipline. This critical stance parallels studies of monumental memory in local communities, where identity formation emerges through selective commemoration rather than consensual history (Afandi & Febriansyah, 2025). Urban monumental symbolism, such as Jakarta's developmental iconography, further demonstrates that public memory often legitimizes power while marginalizing alternative narratives (Wijaya & Yusuf, 2025). Fictional reconfigurations of monuments become interventions into memory politics rather than aesthetic embellishments.

Narratives of home and displacement constitute another central mnemonic structure, where belonging is framed as unstable and historically mediated. The novels portray "home" as an affective project shaped by remembrance and forgetting, rather than as a fixed geographical origin. This interpretive pattern corresponds with analyses of memory and the concept of home in Indonesian diasporic fiction, where spatial longing is inseparable from colonial aftermath (Hu, 2025). Postcolonial belonging is shown as negotiated through layered temporalities, in which the past continuously interrupts the present. Such representations foreground the psychic costs of postcolonial modernity and its unresolved historical inheritances.

Indo-Dutch identity formations appear as a particularly complex field of cultural memory, where hybridity is shaped by migration, intergenerational transmission, and contested colonial legacies. The novels articulate identities that resist binary categorizations, revealing memory as a transnational practice rather than a purely national archive. This resonates with scholarship on Indo-Dutch cultural memory, which emphasizes identity as a negotiated formation across colonial and postcolonial temporalities (Pattinama, 2025). Fictional narratives expose how colonial histories persist through everyday cultural repertoires, language, and affective attachment. Memory becomes a relational process through which subjects navigate belonging across multiple historical registers.

The politics of heritage revival also emerges as an intertextual context shaping literary remembrance, particularly through references to maritime routes, cultural diplomacy, and re-narrated national histories. The novels indirectly engage with heritage projects that seek to reposition Indonesia within global historical networks, revealing tensions between recuperation and commodification. Such dynamics parallel analyses of the Jalur Rempah as a cultural route heritage that reframes colonial trade histories into postcolonial cultural capital (Hara et al., 2025). Literary texts complicate these heritage narratives by foregrounding silenced labor, violence, and dispossession beneath celebratory remembrance. Fiction operates as a critical counter-archive to heritage institutionalization.

A comparable negotiation appears in museum diplomacy and exhibitionary memory, where colonial history is curated through international relations and cultural display. The novels mirror and critique such curatorial practices by emphasizing what remains unexhibited, unspoken, or ethically unresolved. This aligns with studies of postcolonial memory in Indonesian-Dutch museum diplomacy, where exhibitions become sites of negotiation and symbolic reconciliation (Riyanto et al., 2025). Fictional narratives extend this critique by dramatizing the affective residues that diplomacy cannot fully contain. The novels insist that remembrance cannot be reduced to representational closure or cultural spectacle.

The thematic synthesis also indicates that Indonesian novels participate in broader Southeast Asian patterns of negotiated archipelagic identity and colonial resistance. Narrative memory becomes a medium through which nationalist formation is both asserted and questioned, revealing ambivalence toward modern sovereignty. This interpretive insight parallels comparative readings of Pramoedya's resistance narratives, where colonial confrontation shapes identity formation through literary memory (Braga, 2025). The novels situate Indonesian postcoloniality within transregional circuits of remembrance rather than isolated national discourse. Such findings confirm that postcolonial

remembrance in fiction is a dynamic field where identity, violence, ecology, and heritage converge through narrative form (Harahap et al., 2025).

Table 1. Analytical Themes of Cultural Memory in Selected Modern Indonesian Novels

Mnemonic Dimension	Narrative Function	Postcolonial Implication	Key Scholarly Link
Trauma and Family Memory	Intergenerational transmission of violence	Persistence of political terror	Karim et al., 2025
Ecological Remembrance	Landscape as colonial archive	Extraction and resistance	Efendi et al., 2025
Monumental Critique	Ironizing public commemoration	Authority and exclusion	Wijaya & Yusuf, 2025
Diasporic Home Imaginaries	Belonging through displacement	Hybridity and loss	Hu, 2025
Heritage and Diplomacy	Contesting curated history	Institutional memory politics	Riyanto et al., 2025

The table is referenced here to clarify how the thematic-interpretive coding organizes the novels' mnemonic strategies into analytically distinct yet interconnected dimensions. Each category reflects not an empirical measurement but a conceptual mapping derived from systematic close reading, demonstrating how cultural memory functions as a narrative mechanism within postcolonial Indonesian modernity. The clustering of trauma, ecology, monumentality, diaspora, and heritage underscores the interdisciplinary scope of memory politics across literary representation and cultural institutions. These dimensions correspond with broader theoretical debates on cultural amnesia and the reclamation of indigenous voices, where memory remains vulnerable to neocolonial erasure (Jena & Mishra, 2026). The analytical structure also aligns with regional discussions of colonial heritage conflict and peacebuilding, reinforcing that literary memory participates in wider struggles over remembrance and historical authority (Zhu & Kent, 2025).

Silenced indigenous voices remain a critical tension within these mnemonic narratives, as novels repeatedly expose how colonial discourse continues to shape what may be narrated and what remains unspeakable. The texts reveal that cultural memory is not only about recovering the past but also about confronting epistemic exclusions reproduced through neocolonial structures. This aligns with methodological critiques emphasizing the challenges of collaborative postcolonial practices in reclaiming indigenous narratives without reinscribing domination (Jena & Mishra, 2026). Ritual and cultural continuity in other postcolonial contexts suggest that memory is sustained through performative practices beyond textuality, offering comparative insight into Indonesian narrative strategies (Fayzulloyev et al., 2025). Food heritage similarly functions as cultural text through which local wisdom is remembered and contested, expanding the scope of mnemonic representation beyond canonical historiography (Iswari et al., 2025).

Postcolonial Memory, Identity Formations, and Narrative Contestation

The second analytical cluster demonstrates that modern Indonesian novels construct postcolonial identity through memory as an unstable and contested process rather than as a coherent inheritance. Narrative subjectivities are frequently shaped by competing historical registers, where colonial legacies persist through language, cultural hierarchy, and affective displacement. This pattern corresponds with systematic reviews of Indonesian literary criticism that identify cultural identity and local wisdom as recurring yet theoretically fragmented concerns in contemporary scholarship (Simbolon et al., 2026). The novels foreground identity not as essence but as negotiation across trauma, hybridity, and historical rupture. Such negotiations reveal that memory becomes a discursive arena where postcolonial belonging is continuously re-authored.

A central finding is that novels often stage identity through mnemonic conflict between official historiography and marginalized remembrance, producing narrative tensions that destabilize national closure. Literary representations of memory politics show how postcolonial identity emerges through

selective recall, strategic silence, and contested genealogies. This aligns with analyses of memory and identity in Eka Kurniawan's *Beauty Is a Wound*, where narrative grotesquerie exposes unresolved colonial violence within Indonesian modernity (Harahap et al., 2025). Fictional memory thus becomes an epistemic intervention into what can be publicly narrated as history. The novels insist that identity formation remains haunted by the afterlife of colonial domination. Such hauntings underscore that cultural memory functions as critique rather than as commemorative affirmation.

The novels also reveal that postcolonial identity is inseparable from institutional frameworks that shape civic consciousness and collective remembrance. Narrative engagements with historical events frequently mirror civic reinterpretations, where memory becomes a resource for identity consolidation yet remains vulnerable to ideological appropriation. This interpretive pattern resonates with studies of local civic identity in the reinterpretation of the Rengasdengklok event, showing how collective memory is mobilized for historical consciousness (Gunawati, 2025). Indonesian novels complicate this civic instrumentalization by foregrounding ambiguity, dissent, and plural temporalities. Identity emerges not through consensus but through narrative struggle over meaning. Such struggle highlights the limits of memory as a unifying national project.

Another dimension concerns how postcolonial identity is articulated through legal, constitutional, and normative imaginaries embedded within cultural texts. The novels indirectly register the persistence of colonial governance structures through ethical debates on sovereignty, justice, and national values. Comparative work on post-colonial constitutional values demonstrates that decolonization remains incomplete within juridical frameworks, shaping the ideological horizons of postcolonial subjectivity (Rasyid & Kaku, 2025). Fictional narratives translate these abstract tensions into lived experiences of marginalization and resistance. Identity is thus portrayed as structurally conditioned by historical power rather than freely chosen. The novels illuminate how cultural memory intersects with normative struggles over postcolonial legitimacy.

Material and symbolic cultures further mediate identity formation through contested artifacts, monuments, and aesthetic practices that encode colonial histories. The novels repeatedly foreground objects and cultural symbols as carriers of mnemonic violence, revealing how identity is shaped through material inheritance. This aligns with analyses of contested artifacts in diasporic communities, where material culture becomes a site of postcolonial negotiation (Indriyani et al., 2025). Monumental symbolism similarly reflects authority and modernity in Jakarta's development, exposing how public space inscribes ideological identity (Wijaya & Yusuf, 2025). Fictional engagements with such symbols demonstrate that identity is produced through cultural semiotics rather than through abstract discourse alone. The novels thus position memory as materially grounded and politically charged.

Aesthetic boundary-crossing in Indonesian cultural production provides another comparative lens through which narrative identity can be understood. The novels often employ experimental forms, fragmented realism, and intermedial references that challenge conventional representational regimes. This resonates with studies of avant-garde practices in Indonesian cinema exhibitions, where aesthetic disruption becomes a strategy of cultural critique (Pauhrizi et al., 2025). Literary experimentation similarly functions as a postcolonial method of unsettling inherited colonial narrative forms. Identity is expressed through stylistic rupture as much as through thematic content. Such formal strategies suggest that postcolonial memory requires innovative narrative architectures to articulate historical discontinuity.

Ritual and cultural continuity appear as additional structures through which novels negotiate identity across colonial disruption. Narrative depictions of ritual practices often operate as mnemonic performances that sustain community coherence while also revealing historical vulnerability. Comparative postcolonial readings of cultural continuity in Bukhara and Khorezm demonstrate that ritual memory functions as identity preservation amid imperial aftermath (Fayzulloyev et al., 2025). Indonesian novels similarly depict ritual as both resilience and contested tradition, shaped by colonial modernity's fractures. Identity emerges through performative remembrance rather than purely discursive self-definition. Such representations highlight that memory operates through embodied cultural practices as well as textual narration.

Tourism, heritage storytelling, and cultural economy also inform the novels' critique of identity commodification in postcolonial contexts. Narrative engagements with heritage often expose tensions between indigenous memory and market-oriented cultural representation. This aligns with scholarship on crafting destination stories for Indigenous tourism, where cultural memory becomes both shared

narrative and contested resource (Shrestha & L’Espoir Decosta, 2025). Indonesian novels interrogate similar processes by revealing how identity is packaged, displayed, or strategically curated for external consumption. Memory becomes vulnerable to appropriation even as it offers cultural survival. Fiction thus critiques the political economy of remembrance within postcolonial globalization.

The novels further situate identity within broader debates on colonial heritage conflict and peacebuilding, emphasizing that remembrance remains inseparable from regional power struggles. Memory politics across Asia and the Pacific demonstrate that colonial heritage continues to generate conflictual remembrance rather than stable reconciliation (Zhu & Kent, 2025). Indonesian fiction reflects these tensions by dramatizing unresolved antagonisms beneath surface narratives of unity. Identity is portrayed as shaped by competing demands of peacebuilding and historical accountability. Such representations suggest that postcolonial memory cannot be reduced to harmonious multiculturalism. Narrative contestation remains central to cultural identity formation.

Table 2. Identity-Memory Configurations in Postcolonial Indonesian Novels

Identity Configuration	Mnemonic Mechanism	Narrative Strategy	Scholarly Link
Hybridity and Diaspora	Transnational remembrance	Fragmented belonging	Pattynama, 2025
Civic Historical Memory	Local event reinterpretation	Plural historiography	Gunawati, 2025
Normative Postcoloniality	Constitutional afterlives	Ethical narrative tension	Rasyid & Kaku, 2025
Material Cultural Identity	Contested artifacts and monuments	Symbolic critique	Indriyani et al., 2025
Heritage Commodification	Tourism and cultural economy	Resistance to appropriation	Shrestha & L’Espoir Decosta, 2025

The table is inserted here to synthesize how identity formation in the novels is mediated through diverse mnemonic mechanisms that extend beyond individual subjectivity into civic, material, and transnational domains. Each configuration reflects conceptual mapping derived from interpretive coding rather than empirical quantification, emphasizing the analytical coherence of postcolonial memory as identity struggle. The clustering demonstrates that novels articulate identity through hybrid belonging, civic remembrance, normative tension, and heritage commodification, reinforcing interdisciplinary intersections between literature and cultural politics. These findings align with critiques of neocolonial cultural amnesia, where identity remains vulnerable to erasure through collaborative or institutional practices that reproduce domination (Jena & Mishra, 2026). The novels thus position cultural memory as an unfinished process of reclaiming voice, resisting appropriation, and narrating postcolonial subjectivity within contested historical space.

Heritage, Cultural Institutions, and the Ethical Afterlives of Colonial Memory

The third analytical dimension indicates that modern Indonesian novels increasingly engage with heritage discourse as a contested arena where colonial memory is institutionalized, negotiated, and ethically disputed. Narrative representations of museums, monuments, and cultural routes reveal that remembrance is shaped not only by private trauma but also by public infrastructures of commemoration. This aligns with scholarship on museum diplomacy in Indonesian-Dutch relations, where exhibitions function as symbolic negotiations over colonial history rather than neutral cultural displays (Riyanto et al., 2025). Fictional texts amplify these tensions by dramatizing what institutional heritage frameworks cannot fully contain, particularly the affective residues of violence and dispossession. The novels thus position heritage as a political technology that structures postcolonial memory in uneven ways. Such engagements confirm that cultural memory remains inseparable from institutional power and representational authority.

A recurring narrative pattern is the critique of monumental heritage as both identity resource and ideological discipline within postcolonial modernity. Novels often depict monuments as ambivalent signifiers that simultaneously promise unity and reproduce exclusions rooted in colonial hierarchies.

This interpretive insight resonates with studies of monumental memory in local communities, where monuments shape identity formation through selective remembrance rather than historical completeness (Afandi & Febriansyah, 2025). Urban development narratives similarly demonstrate that monuments in Jakarta function as symbols of authority and modernity, embedding memory within spatial regimes of governance (Wijaya & Yusuf, 2025). Fictional portrayals expose how monumental heritage can obscure subaltern histories beneath national spectacle. Memory becomes an architectural politics rather than a consensual archive. Such critiques underscore the ethical stakes of commemorative representation.

The novels also engage with maritime heritage imaginaries, where colonial trade histories are reframed as cultural capital within contemporary postcolonial projects. References to the Spice Route and archipelagic connectivity reveal tensions between recuperative nationalism and the commodification of colonial pasts. This parallels analyses of Indonesia's efforts to revive Jalur Rempah as a cultural route heritage that re-narrates colonial networks into postcolonial identity claims (Hara et al., 2025). Fiction complicates these celebratory narratives by foregrounding violence, labor exploitation, and silenced indigenous agency within maritime histories. Heritage revival emerges as a site of mnemonic struggle rather than historical restoration. The novels thus insist that cultural routes remain haunted by colonial extraction. Such hauntings reveal the limits of heritage as reconciliation.

Material culture appears as another institutionalized terrain through which colonial memory persists and is contested in narrative form. The novels frequently stage artifacts and everyday objects as mnemonic residues that circulate across diasporic and postcolonial spaces, revealing how heritage becomes both intimate and political. This aligns with material culture analyses of contested artifacts in diasporic communities, where objects mediate identity and colonial afterlives beyond formal institutions (Indriyani et al., 2025). Fictional engagements with artifacts highlight how memory is embedded in material traces that resist curatorial closure. Objects function as counter-archives that expose what museums may sanitize or aestheticize. Heritage thus becomes unstable, shaped by affective attachment and historical violence. Such instability reinforces the novels' ethical interrogation of remembrance.

Cultural institutions are further critiqued through the lens of heritage conflict and peacebuilding, where colonial memory remains a volatile political resource. Regional scholarship emphasizes that colonial heritage across Asia and the Pacific generates contested remembrance that complicates narratives of harmonious reconciliation (Zhu & Kent, 2025). Indonesian novels reflect these tensions by dramatizing how institutional heritage frameworks often manage conflict through selective representation rather than genuine historical accountability. Memory politics becomes an arena where peacebuilding may coexist with silencing and symbolic containment. Fiction exposes these contradictions by foregrounding unresolved antagonisms beneath official narratives. Such representations suggest that heritage is inseparable from power struggles over visibility. The novels thus position cultural memory as ethically unfinished.

Ethical questions of narrating colonial history emerge as central to the novels' engagement with institutional remembrance. The texts repeatedly confront the problem of how to write history without reproducing ideological domination or reducing trauma to aesthetic spectacle. This concern resonates with axiological discussions of writing history within Pancasila perspectives, where ethical responsibility is integral to national historical narration (Yuwono et al., 2025). Fictional narratives translate these debates into literary form by staging narrators who struggle with testimony, silence, and representational limits. Memory becomes an ethical burden rather than a stable resource. Such burdens reveal that postcolonial remembrance requires reflexive narrative accountability. The novels thus contribute to broader debates on the ethics of cultural memory production.

Neocolonial cultural amnesia appears as a persistent institutional risk, where heritage practices may reproduce colonial epistemic exclusions under the guise of collaboration or multicultural display. Methodological critiques emphasize that reclaiming indigenous voices requires confronting the structural challenges of postcolonial collaborative practices that can inadvertently reinscribe domination (Jena & Mishra, 2026). Indonesian novels dramatize similar tensions by exposing how institutional memory often marginalizes subaltern narratives even when claiming inclusivity. Fiction functions as a site of resistance against amnesia by foregrounding silenced histories and alternative epistemologies. Memory becomes a struggle over voice and narrative authority rather than mere recollection. Such

struggles underscore that heritage institutions remain contested terrains of power. The novels insist that decolonial remembrance demands more than symbolic recognition.

Ritual continuity and cultural performance provide an alternative to institutional heritage, suggesting that memory is sustained through embodied practices beyond museums and monuments. Comparative postcolonial readings of ritual and identity continuity demonstrate that cultural memory persists through performative structures that resist imperial disruption (Fayzulloyev et al., 2025). Indonesian novels similarly depict rituals, oral traditions, and communal practices as living archives that challenge state-centered heritage frameworks. Memory becomes enacted rather than curated, emphasizing resilience through cultural repetition and transformation. Such representations broaden the analytical scope of heritage beyond institutionalization. Fiction thus foregrounds vernacular remembrance as ethically significant. These narratives highlight that cultural memory is sustained through everyday performance.

Food heritage and indigenous cultural texts further expand the novels' engagement with memory as cultural practice rather than institutional artifact. Narrative references to cuisine, local wisdom, and socio-anthropological textures demonstrate how memory circulates through sensory and communal domains. This aligns with readings of traditional cuisine as cultural text, where food heritage becomes a medium of identity and historical continuity within indigenous communities (Iswari et al., 2025). Indonesian novels employ similar strategies by embedding remembrance in quotidian cultural practices that resist abstraction. Memory becomes materially and sensorially grounded, challenging elite heritage discourse. Such grounding reveals that postcolonial identity is sustained through everyday cultural labor. Fiction thus critiques institutional hierarchies of remembrance.

Table 3. Institutional and Vernacular Arenas of Colonial Memory in Indonesian Novels

Memory Arena	Narrative Representation	Ethical Tension	Scholarly Link
Museum Diplomacy	Curated colonial history	Symbolic containment	Riyanto et al., 2025
Monumental Heritage	Authority and exclusion	Selective commemoration	Afandi & Febriansyah, 2025
Cultural Route Revival	Spice Route imaginaries	Commodification of past	Hara et al., 2025
Ritual Continuity	Embodied remembrance	Resistance to erasure	Fayzulloyev et al., 2025
Food Heritage Practices	Sensory cultural memory	Vernacular survival	Iswari et al., 2025

The table is positioned here to synthesize how Indonesian novels negotiate colonial memory through both institutional infrastructures and vernacular practices, revealing that heritage operates across multiple scales of power and intimacy. Each arena reflects interpretive mapping derived from close reading, emphasizing that cultural memory is structured through competing regimes of representation rather than unified historical consciousness. The analytical contrast between museum diplomacy, monumental heritage, ritual enactment, and food practices demonstrates that novels function as critical mediators of postcolonial ethics. These findings align with broader theoretical reconsiderations of collective memory in a colonial present, where remembrance remains shaped by ongoing structures of domination (McIntyre, 2026). Indonesian fiction ultimately insists that colonial memory cannot be resolved through institutional heritage alone, since ethical accountability requires narrative openness to trauma, silenced voices, and contested cultural survival.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that modern Indonesian novels operate as critical mnemonic spaces in which cultural memory and postcolonial perspectives intersect to contest colonial afterlives, negotiate identity formations, and interrogate the ethics of heritage representation. Through non-empirical qualitative close reading and thematic-interpretive coding, the findings reveal that remembrance in Indonesian fiction is structured through trauma narratives, ecological imaginaries, diasporic belonging,

and institutional memory politics, showing that memory functions as an active arena of ideological struggle rather than passive recollection. The novels expose how monuments, museums, cultural routes, and vernacular practices become contested sites where colonial histories are selectively curated, silenced, or rearticulated, emphasizing that postcolonial identity remains unstable and continuously re-authored through narrative form. By integrating cultural memory theory with postcolonial critique, the research contributes to broader debates on collective remembrance, neocolonial amnesia, and the ethical responsibilities of representing violence and historical rupture in literature. Ultimately, Indonesian novels emerge as vital counter-archives that resist institutional closure and sustain decolonial engagements with history, belonging, and cultural survival.

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