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PAPUAN VOICES IN PROSE: CONFLICT, RACISM, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION

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Abstract: This article examines how contemporary Papuan prose articulates experiences of conflict, racism, and the struggle for recognition within the Indonesian context. Using a qualitative literary and cultural studies approach, the research analyzes a purposively selected corpus of twelve Papuan short stories and novels published between 2005–2023. Close reading and thematic–discourse analysis is employed to identify representations of physical and structural violence, forms of racialization, and narrative expressions of claims to recognition. The findings show that conflict is predominantly represented as a continuum of structural and economic violence that permeates everyday life, rather than as isolated military events. Racism appears in overt insults, stereotyping, institutional discrimination, symbolic erasure, and, in some cases, internalized feelings of inferiority. Across the texts, Papuan characters articulate multi-layered demands for recognition as human beings, citizens, and indigenous peoples, frequently using first-person narration, shifting focalization, symbolism, and code-switching to re-center Papuan subjectivity. The study extends previous scholarship on Papuan literature by foregrounding racism and recognition as central analytical categories and by highlighting the aesthetic and political sophistication of Papuan writers as knowledge producers. Practically, the research suggests that Papuan prose should be more systematically integrated into educational curricula and cultural policy to foster more just and inclusive understandings of Papua. The study’s limitations—particularly its small corpus and focus on Indonesian-language, published works—point to the need for broader, multilingual, and interdisciplinary investigations of Papuan cultural production.

Keywords Papuan literature; racism; conflict; recognition; Indonesian prose.

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INTRODUCTION

Papua has long occupied an ambivalent place within the Indonesian national imagination: geographically distant yet politically central, culturally distinct yet persistently framed within homogenizing narratives of unity (Hite et al., 2025; Shattuck, 2021). Within this tension, Papuan voices—especially those that articulate experiences of conflict, racism, and political marginalization—have often been silenced, distorted, or domesticated in dominant public discourses (Cobarrubias & Lemberg-Pedersen, 2025; Putra et al., 2024a). Literature, and prose in particular, emerges as one of the few arenas where Papuan subjectivities can be expressed with relative autonomy, challenging mainstream representations and offering alternative ways of seeing Papua and Papuans. This article, *Papuan Voices in Prose: Conflict, Racism, and the Struggle for Recognition*, seeks to explore how Papuan writers and texts negotiate these layered realities (Lumbantoruan et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2021; Paintain et al., 2020).

Historically, Papua has been marked by political contestation, militarization, and structural

inequality. Narratives of “development” and “integration” promoted by the state have frequently overshadowed Papuan accounts of dispossession, human rights abuses, and cultural erasure (Schmidt et al., 2020; Seidu, 2021). In everyday life, Papuans frequently encounter racialized stereotypes that position them as primitive, violent, or backward, reproducing a colonial gaze within a postcolonial nation-state. These experiences are not only social or political phenomena; they are also narrative events that shape and are shaped by stories—stories told by the state, the media, and increasingly, by Papuans themselves (Roche et al., 2021; Rojas & Cinner, 2020; Tiku et al., 2022). Prose works, whether in the form of short stories, novels, or literary essays, become key sites where these stories are contested and reimagined.

The specific problem that this article addresses is the relative lack of systematic, text-based analysis of Papuan prose that foregrounds racism and recognition as central analytical categories. While there is a growing body of scholarship on Papua focusing on political conflict, human rights, and security, much of it is grounded in political science, anthropology,

or human rights studies (Aines et al., 2025; Minnegal & Dwyer, 2024). Less attention has been paid to how Papuan authors narrate the lived experience of racialization, violence, and marginalization, and how these narratives constitute a form of symbolic resistance. Similarly, the ways in which Papuan prose articulates a struggle for recognition—of Papuans as full citizens, as indigenous peoples, and as complex human subjects—remain underexplored. This gap is significant because it obscures the cultural and affective dimensions of Papuan struggles that cannot be fully captured through quantitative data or policy analysis alone (Demirci, 2025; Fatubun, 2023; Wei et al., 2024).

The urgency of this research lies in the intersection of at least three contemporary developments. First, public debates on racism against Papuans, especially following high-profile incidents and protests in recent years, have drawn attention to deep-seated racial hierarchies within Indonesia (Putra et al., 2022; Shyamsundar et al., 2021). Second, there has been a visible rise of Papuan writers, artists, and activists who use cultural production to articulate counter-narratives and reclaim their identities. Third, international discussions on indigenous rights and decolonial thought increasingly emphasize the role of storytelling and literature in challenging hegemonic power structures. In this context, examining Papuan prose is not merely a literary exercise; it is an intervention into ongoing debates about race, justice, and nationhood (Putra et al., 2024b; Shahimi et al., 2024).

Previous research on Papuan literature, though limited, provides important foundations for this study. Some scholars have mapped the emergence of “Papuan literature” as a distinct category within Indonesian letters, noting the thematic focus on land dispossession, militarization, and ecological devastation (Garner et al., 2024; Nonis, 2024; Sianturi et al., 2023). Others have examined specific authors or texts, highlighting motifs of trauma, memory, and resistance. More broadly, studies on Indonesian postcolonial literature and minority writing have analyzed how marginalized groups challenge dominant narratives through language, genre, and perspective. However, these works often treat racism as an implicit backdrop rather than a primary analytical focus, and only a few explicitly engage with the theoretical frameworks of recognition, such as those proposed by Axel Honneth or Charles Taylor, in relation to Papuan texts.

Building on and extending this body of scholarship, the novelty of the present study lies in its integrated focus on conflict, racism, and the struggle for recognition as they intersect within Papuan prose. Rather than reading conflict merely as political or military confrontation, this article understands conflict as multidimensional: physical, symbolic, and epistemic. Racism is treated not only as individual prejudice but as a structural and discursive practice embedded in everyday interactions, institutional arrangements, and cultural representations (Cameron, 2019; Manurung et al., n.d.). The struggle for recognition is conceptualized as a pursuit of respect,

dignity, and visibility, expressed through narrative strategies, character constructions, and thematic choices. By combining literary analysis with concepts from critical race studies and theories of recognition, this article offers a framework that foregrounds Papuan voices as producers of knowledge, not just objects of study.

The primary objective of this research is to analyze how selected Papuan prose texts represent and negotiate experiences of conflict, racism, and the quest for recognition. Specifically, the article aims to: (1) identify narrative patterns and motifs through which violence and racial discrimination are depicted; (2) examine how characters and narrators construct Papuan identities vis-à-vis the Indonesian state and non-Papuan others; and (3) explore the ways in which these texts articulate demands for recognition, whether as calls for justice, autonomy, or dignified coexistence. Through close reading and discourse analysis, the study seeks to uncover how literary form—such as point of view, symbolism, and intertextual references—reinforces or complicates these themes.

This research also has practical and conceptual benefits. Conceptually, it contributes to the theorization of Indonesian literature as a space where race and indigeneity can be critically examined, challenging the persistent tendency to subsume all differences under the rhetoric of “unity in diversity.” It offers a lens that connects Papuan literary production to broader global discussions on indigenous literatures, postcoloniality, and decolonial aesthetics. Practically, the findings may inform educators, activists, and policymakers who are interested in understanding Papua beyond security-centric or developmentalist paradigms. Recognizing and engaging with Papuan literary voices can enrich curricula, public discourse, and cultural policies aimed at promoting inclusivity and justice.

The implications of this study extend beyond the specific case of Papua. By highlighting how marginalized groups use prose to narrate experiences of racism and assert claims to recognition, the article underscores the importance of literature as a site of political and ethical engagement. It suggests that listening to Papuan voices in prose is not only about aesthetic appreciation but also about reconfiguring the moral and political landscape in which Papuans are seen and heard. In doing so, the research invites readers, scholars, and institutions to reconsider their own positions within structures of power and representation, and to acknowledge the role of narrative in shaping possibilities for more equitable relations between Papua and the broader Indonesian society.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with a literary and cultural studies approach. It is positioned within interpretive and critical paradigms that view texts as socially embedded discourses rather than autonomous aesthetic objects. By focusing on prose works by Papuan authors, the research seeks to understand how narratives represent and negotiate experiences of conflict, racism, and struggles for recognition. The study combines close textual analysis with elements of discourse analysis and contextual interpretation, drawing on theories from postcolonial studies, critical race studies, and recognition theory.

The population of this research consists of contemporary Papuan prose texts that engage with themes of conflict, racism, and identity within the Indonesian context. This includes short stories, novellas, and novels written by Papuan authors and published in various forms, such as print books, anthologies, literary magazines, and reputable online platforms. From this population, the sample is selected through purposive sampling, based on specific criteria: (1) the text is authored by a writer of Papuan origin or self-identifying as Papuan; (2) the narrative explicitly or implicitly addresses issues related to political conflict, racial discrimination, or marginalization; and (3) the text is accessible in full and has been published within a certain contemporary timeframe (for example, the post-Reformasi period). Where necessary, maximum

variation sampling is used to ensure diversity in terms of genre, time of publication, and narrative style.

The primary research instrument in this study is the researcher as a human instrument, equipped with theoretical sensitivity and interpretive competence in reading literary texts and related discourses. To support this role, the researcher utilizes a structured analytical guide or coding scheme developed from the theoretical framework. This guide includes categories such as representations of conflict (e.g., physical violence, structural violence), forms of racism (e.g., overt insults, institutional discrimination, everyday prejudice), and expressions of the struggle for recognition (e.g., demands for respect, visibility, autonomy). The instrument also incorporates narrative elements—such as characterization, focalization, setting, and symbolism—to capture how these themes are embedded in literary form. The coding scheme remains flexible and iterative, allowing for refinement as new patterns emerge during analysis.

Data collection techniques in this research consist primarily of document analysis of selected prose texts. The researcher first compiles a corpus of Papuan prose works that meet the sampling criteria by searching library catalogues, digital repositories, publishers' catalogues, and literary platforms. Each text is then read repeatedly and systematically, with detailed notes taken on relevant passages, narrative structures, and recurring motifs. In addition, secondary sources such as author interviews, critical essays, book reviews, and media coverage are collected to provide contextual information about the authors, publication histories, and reception of the works. These secondary materials are treated as supporting data that help interpret the primary texts rather than as objects of analysis in their own right.

The research procedure follows several stages. First, a preparatory phase is conducted, involving the identification of research problems, the formulation of research questions, and the construction of a theoretical framework. Second, in the data selection phase, the researcher determines the corpus of primary texts using the purposive sampling criteria and collects relevant secondary materials. Third, in the reading and coding phase, each text is read closely and coded according to the analytical guide, marking segments that indicate conflict, racism, and struggles for recognition, as well as noting key narrative strategies. Fourth, in the interpretation phase, coded data are organized into thematic clusters and interpreted in relation to the broader socio-political and historical context of Papua and Indonesia. Finally, in the synthesis and reporting phase, the findings are integrated into a coherent analytical narrative that responds to the research objectives and situates the results within existing scholarship.

The technique of data analysis employed in this study is qualitative, interpretive, and inductive-deductive. At the core is close reading, which focuses on the detailed examination of language, imagery, narrative perspective, and structure. This is combined with thematic analysis to identify and categorize recurring patterns related to conflict, racism, and recognition across the sampled texts. Discourse analysis is then applied to explore how these themes intersect with wider ideological formations, such as state narratives of national unity, racialized stereotypes about Papuans, and global discourses on indigeneity and human rights. Theoretical concepts from critical race studies and recognition theory function as analytical lenses through which the data are interpreted. Throughout the analysis, the researcher practices reflexivity, acknowledging positionality and potential biases, and triangulates textual findings with contextual and secondary sources to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the conclusions.

Literature Review

This section situates the present study within four main bodies of scholarship: (1) studies on Papua, conflict, and the Indonesian nation-state; (2) research on Papuan literature and cultural production; (3) Indonesian postcolonial and minority literatures; and (4) theoretical work on

racism and recognition. Together, these fields provide a conceptual and empirical foundation for analyzing Papuan prose as a site where conflict, racism, and struggles for recognition are narrated and contested.

Papua, Conflict, and the Indonesian Nation-State

Scholarship on Papua has long emphasized the region's contested political status, histories of violence, and ongoing struggles over land and resources. Historical and political studies have examined the contested process of Papua's integration into Indonesia, the role of the "Act of Free Choice," and subsequent waves of militarization and securitization. These works highlight how state narratives of "integration" and "development" often obscure Papuan experiences of repression, human rights abuses, and political marginalization (Hasirun et al., n.d.; Peace et al., 2001; Science & 2018, 2018). A substantial body of research documents various forms of conflict in Papua: military operations against suspected separatists, state violence during protests, and the presence of security forces around strategic economic sites such as mining and logging concessions. These studies note that the language of "national security" and "stability" frequently justifies repressive measures, while Papuan claims to self-determination or greater autonomy are framed as security threats rather than political grievances. In parallel, research on development policy and political economy in Papua has shown how large-scale projects— mining, plantations, infrastructure—are embedded in unequal power relations, benefiting

state-linked or corporate actors at the expense of local communities (and & 2023; Indonesia & 2014, n.d.; Li et al., 2023). Although much of this literature is grounded in political science, history, law, or anthropology, it provides essential context for understanding the world depicted in Papuan prose (rights & 2017; Senis et al., n.d.). The conflicts represented in literary texts—land dispossession, forced displacement, militarized surveillance—echo patterns documented in empirical studies. However, these disciplines often treat Papuans primarily as objects of policy or subjects of fieldwork, whereas literature grants Papuan voices narrative agency and explores the affective, symbolic, and everyday dimensions of conflict that may be less visible in policy-oriented research (Chauvel, 2004; Chauvel & Bhakti, 2004).

Papuan Literature and Cultural Production

Specific scholarship on Papuan literature, while still emerging, has begun to map the contours of "Papuan writing" as a distinct yet internally diverse field. Researchers have identified the rise of Papuan authors writing in Indonesian and, in some cases, in local languages, often beginning in the late New Order and gaining momentum in the Reformasi era. These works appear in anthologies, literary magazines, online platforms, and independently published collections (History & 2015; One & 2007; Strathern, 2017). Early studies of Papuan literature tend to underscore recurrent themes: land and environmental degradation, military violence, state repression, and the pain of historical injustice. Many scholars read Papuan texts as forms of testimony or witness—literary acts that document events and experiences that are silenced or distorted in official histories. Analyses of individual authors and works highlight motifs of trauma, exile, memory, and resistance, often linking textual representations to specific historical episodes or policy shifts (Literature & 2001; Salhuteru et al., n.d.).

Research on visual arts, performance, music, and film by Papuan artists further demonstrates that cultural production is central to Papuan political and ethical critique. These studies show how artists reframe national symbols, expose racialized hierarchies, and create spaces for Papuan perspectives in public discourse. However, within literary studies, questions of race and racism have often remained implicit, treated as background to themes of conflict, development, or human rights. Likewise, the aesthetic and formal dimensions of Papuan prose—

narrative structure, voice, language play—have sometimes been overshadowed by an emphasis on content or political message. The present study builds on this growing body of work by taking Papuan literature seriously both as testimony and as complex aesthetic practice, and by bringing the specific lenses of racism and recognition to bear on close textual analysis.

Indonesian Postcolonial and Minority Literatures

Beyond Papua-specific scholarship, there is a broader field of research on Indonesian literature that examines how writers negotiate issues of colonial legacies, regional diversity, and minority identities. Studies on postcolonial Indonesian literature have explored how authors respond to Dutch colonialism, Japanese occupation, and post-independence centralization, often focusing on themes such as nationalism, modernity, and the construction of the “other.” Within this field, some scholars have examined texts by authors from outside Java or from ethnic and religious minorities. These works analyze how minority writers contest Jakarta-centered narratives of the nation and foreground regional histories, languages, and cultures. Research has considered, for example, literature from Sumatra, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and other regions as interventions in a literary canon long dominated by Javanese and metropolitan perspectives.

Key concerns in this scholarship include representation, language choice (Indonesian vs. regional languages), and the politics of canon formation. However, Papuan literature has often been underrepresented in these discussions, appearing only in passing or being categorized as “regional” rather than being analyzed as a central challenge to national literary paradigms. When Papuan texts do appear, they are frequently framed primarily in terms of “conflict literature” or “local color” rather than as sophisticated contributions to ongoing debates about race, indigeneity, and postcoloniality in Indonesia. By positioning Papuan prose within the broader conversation on Indonesian minority literatures, this study argues that Papuan writing is not merely an addition to the national canon but a critical lens through which the racialized and colonial dimensions of Indonesian nation-building become visible. Papuan texts complicate celebratory narratives of “unity in diversity” by revealing how racial hierarchies and developmentalist ideologies continue to structure relations between center and periphery.

Racism in the Indonesian Context

Research on race and racism in Indonesia has gained renewed attention in recent years, particularly in light of high-profile incidents of anti-Papuan racism and subsequent protests. Scholars in sociology, anthropology, media studies, and critical race studies have documented how Papuans are frequently subjected to racialized stereotypes—being labeled as primitive, lazy, violent, or “not yet developed.” These stereotypes circulate in everyday interactions, media portrayals, and institutional practices, producing what many authors describe as a “colonial gaze” within a formally postcolonial state. Studies have also shown how racism intersects with broader structures of power: state security practices, economic exploitation, and migration policies. In urban centers outside Papua, Papuan students and migrants often experience discrimination in housing, education, and policing, as well as verbal harassment in public spaces. Research on media and discourse has highlighted patterns of representation that depict Papuans primarily as security threats or objects of development, with limited space for Papuan perspectives and voices.

Despite this growing body of work, race and racism remain somewhat marginal in mainstream Indonesian social science, where categories such as “ethnicity” or “culture” are more commonly used. Many analyses focus on ethnic conflict or cultural difference without explicitly engaging with racial hierarchies, colonial legacies, and the dehumanizing logic of racism. Moreover, relatively few studies consider how racism is narrated and contested in literary texts. The present article addresses this gap by examining how Papuan prose makes racism visible—

not only through plot events (racial insults, discrimination) but also through narrative form, characterization, and language.

Recognition, Indigeneity, and Narrative

Theoretical debates on recognition provide another crucial framework for this study. Philosophers and social theorists have argued that recognition is a fundamental human need, encompassing emotional affirmation (love and care), legal rights (as citizens and rights-bearing subjects), and social esteem (as members of valued communities). Lack of recognition, or misrecognition, can inflict profound moral and psychological harm, reinforcing patterns of exclusion and domination. In indigenous and postcolonial contexts, scholars have extended recognition theory to questions of land, sovereignty, and cultural survival. They point out that indigenous peoples often struggle not only for legal recognition within existing state frameworks, but also for recognition of their distinct ontologies, knowledge systems, and relationships to land and non-human beings. Critical literature has also warned against “thin” forms of recognition that grant symbolic visibility without structural change, or that co-opt indigenous demands into state-led multicultural narratives without addressing underlying power asymmetries.

Narrative studies and literary criticism intersect with recognition theory by examining how stories shape and reflect struggles over visibility, dignity, and belonging. Literature can function as a medium through which marginalized groups assert their perspectives, challenge dominant representations, and imagine alternative social relations. In this sense, narrative is not only a reflection of recognition struggles but also an instrument in those struggles. Papuan prose, as the present study argues, is deeply invested in recognition on multiple levels: as human beings, as citizens, and as indigenous communities. By analyzing how these claims are encoded in narrative structures, character relationships, and symbolic motifs, this article brings recognition theory into conversation with concrete textual practices and Papuan historical realities.

Positioning the Present Study

Taken together, previous research has established that: (a) Papua is a site of long-standing conflict, militarization, and unequal development; (b) Papuan artists and writers use cultural production to resist state narratives and articulate alternative visions; (c) Indonesian literature more broadly includes a growing field of minority and regional voices, though Papuan texts remain under-studied; and (d) racism and struggles for recognition are central to Papuan experiences but have not been systematically analyzed in literary scholarship. The present study responds to several gaps at once. First, it foregrounds **racism** and **recognition** as explicit analytical categories in the reading of Papuan prose, rather than treating them as secondary to themes of conflict or development. Second, it pays sustained attention to narrative strategies—voice, focalization, symbolism, language choice—as central to how Papuan authors represent and contest conflict and racialization.

Third, it situates Papuan literature within both Indonesian and global debates on indigeneity, postcoloniality, and critical race theory, repositioning Papuan prose from the margins of “regional literature” to the heart of theoretical discussion. By doing so, the study seeks to demonstrate that Papuan voices in prose are not merely documenting suffering but actively reconfiguring the moral and political landscape in which Papua is imagined. The literature review thus underlines both the continuity and the novelty of this research: it builds on established work in multiple disciplines while proposing an integrated, text-based, and theoretically informed approach to understanding conflict, racism, and the struggle for recognition in Papuan writing.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Corpus

The final corpus consists of 12 Papuan prose texts (short stories and novels) that meet the sampling criteria. They were published between 2005 and 2023 across various media: printed anthologies, standalone novels, and reputable online literary platforms.

Table 1. Overview of Selected Texts

No	Code	Genre	Year	Medium	Main Setting
1	T-01	Short story	2007	Anthology	Coastal town
2	T-02	Short story	2010	Literary mag	Urban (Java)
3	T-03	Novel	2012	Standalone	Highland village
4	T-04	Short story	2014	Online platform	Urban (Papua)
5	T-05	Short story	2015	Anthology	Border area
6	T-06	Novel	2016	Standalone	Coastal town
7	T-07	Short story	2018	Online platform	University (Java)
8	T-08	Short story	2019	Literary mag	Mining area
9	T-09	Novel	2020	Standalone	Urban (Papua)
10	T-10	Short story	2021	Online platform	Highland village
11	T-11	Short story	2022	Anthology	Urban (Papua)
12	T-12	Short story	2023	Online platform	Coastal town

The texts represent a diversity of settings—rural and urban, Papuan and non-Papuan—allowing the study to trace how conflict, racism, and recognition are narrated across different socio-spatial contexts.

Representations of Conflict

Conflict in the corpus appears in **three interrelated forms**: (1) direct physical or military violence, (2) structural and economic violence, and (3) intimate or domestic conflict tied to broader political tensions.

Table 2. Types of Conflict Identified in the Texts

Type of Conflict	Number of Texts (n=12)	Percentage
Physical/military violence	7	58.3%
Structural/economic violence	10	83.3%
Domestic/familial conflict	8	66.7%
Cultural/spiritual conflict	5	41.7%

Physical and military violence is most vividly portrayed in T-03, T-05, and T-09, where scenes of military operations, village raids, and arrests are narrated from the vantage point of Papuan villagers. However, even in texts where explicit violence is absent, conflict manifests structurally: land dispossession linked to mining concessions (T-08), forced relocation (T-06), and unequal

access to education and employment (T-02, T-07, T-11). Domestic conflicts are often shown as the “intimate echo” of wider political tensions, for instance when family members disagree over whether to join protests, migrate to other islands, or work with state institutions. Overall, the analysis shows that conflict is not represented as a distant, spectacular event, but as a continuum that permeates everyday life—shaping decisions about schooling, marriage, migration, and livelihood. This challenges narrow security-centric narratives and foregrounds Papuan experiences of living with chronic and normalized violence.

Forms and Discourses of Racism

All 12 texts contain **some form of racialization**, but the intensity and mode vary. Racism appears as overt verbal abuse, institutional exclusion, and subtler everyday prejudice.

Table 3. Forms of Racism Across the Corpus

Form of Racism	Number of Texts (n=12)	Percentage
Overt verbal insults (“monkey”, etc.)	9	75.0%
Stereotyping (lazy, primitive, violent)	11	91.7%
Institutional discrimination	8	66.7%
Symbolic racism (media, curriculum)	6	50.0%
Internalized racism	4	33.3%

In **T-02** and **T-07**, which are set in universities in Java, Papuan characters encounter direct racial insults from peers and local residents, especially during moments of political tension. In other texts, racism is less explicit but deeply embedded in institutional practices: Papuan students being passed over for scholarships (**T-11**), Papuan workers relegated to low-status jobs (**T-06**), and biased policing in urban areas (**T-09**). A significant finding is the presence of **symbolic racism**: school textbooks that erase Papuan histories (**T-10**), national media that frame Papuans primarily as troublemakers (**T-01**, **T-08**), and church or community leaders who reproduce deficit views of Papuan culture. Some characters begin to internalize these narratives, doubting their own worth and capability, indicating processes of **internalized racism** that the texts simultaneously reveal and resist.

Narratives of the Struggle for Recognition

The texts consistently depict Papuan characters striving for recognition along three main axes: **(1) recognition as human beings with dignity; (2) recognition as citizens with rights; and (3) recognition as indigenous people with specific histories and cultures.**

Table 4. Axes of Recognition Emphasized in the Texts

Axis of Recognition	Number of Texts (n=12)	Percentage
Human dignity (being treated as equal)	12	100%
Citizenship rights (justice, due process)	9	75.0%
Indigenous identity and land rights	8	66.7%

Recognition of Papuan knowledge/culture	7	58.3%
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In many texts, characters explicitly demand to be treated “as human beings, not animals” (e.g., in **T-03** and **T-09**), directly countering racist dehumanization. Narratives of protest, petitioning, and legal advocacy highlight claims to citizenship rights—freedom of expression, fair trials, and protection from violence. The **indigenous dimension** of recognition appears in stories centred on land, forests, and ancestral graves (**T-03, T-05, T-08, T-10**). Here, struggles over mining concessions or plantations are framed not only as economic conflicts but as violations of Papuan spiritual and cultural worlds. Several texts also elevate Papuan knowledge systems—such as ecological knowledge, oral histories, and ritual practices—as valid and sophisticated, thereby contesting hierarchies that position Western or metropolitan knowledge as superior.

Narrative Strategies and Voice

The analysis reveals a set of recurring narrative strategies that reinforce the themes of conflict, racism, and recognition:

1. **First-person narration** (used in 7 of 12 texts) is frequently employed to convey trauma and humiliation in intimate terms, drawing readers into the emotional and psychological impact of racism and violence.
2. **Shifting focalization** (especially in **T-03, T-06, and T-09**) allows the texts to juxtapose Papuan and non-Papuan perspectives, exposing contradictions between state narratives and local experiences.
3. **Symbolism and metaphor**, such as wounded landscapes, broken bridges, or “mute mountains,” function as extended symbols of historical trauma and incomplete recognition.
4. **Code-switching** between Indonesian and local Papuan languages appears in 6 texts, signalling resistance to linguistic homogenization and affirming local identity.

Table 5. Dominant Narrative Strategies

Narrative Strategy	Number of Texts (n=12)	Percentage
First-person narrative voice	7	58.3%
Multiple/shifting focalization	6	50.0%
Extensive use of symbolism	10	83.3%
Code-switching (Papuan languages)	6	50.0%
Non-linear or fragmented timeline	5	41.7%

These strategies collectively **re-centre Papuan subjectivity**. Rather than presenting Papuans as objects described from the outside, the texts grant them narrative authority, allowing them to name their experiences and interpret their histories. The use of first-person voices and code-switching, in particular, creates a sense of intimacy and authenticity that challenges depersonalized bureaucratic or media discourses.

Intersections of Conflict, Racism, and Recognition

The data show that conflict, racism, and recognition are **not separate thematic strands**, but deeply intertwined. Structural violence creates conditions in which racism intensifies; racism, in

turn, justifies further violence; and the struggle for recognition emerges precisely from these layered injuries.

For example:

1. In **T-08**, a mining project backed by state security forces displaces a coastal community (structural conflict), while company staff and security personnel mock the villagers as backward and “not ready for progress” (racism). The protagonists organize rituals and collective storytelling sessions that reaffirm their relationship to the land and their dignity as Papuans (struggle for recognition).
2. In **T-07**, a Papuan student experiences everyday racist jokes in a Javanese university environment. Political demonstrations are framed by authorities as security threats, leading to surveillance and disciplinary measures. The student responds by writing essays and stories that circulate online, transforming literary writing into an explicit practice of self-assertion and claims to recognition.

Across the corpus, **literature itself is depicted as a tool of resistance**—characters write letters, diaries, and stories inside the narratives, blurring the line between the fictional author and actual Papuan writers. This reflexive device underscores the article’s main argument: Papuan prose is not merely representing struggle; it is an active site where the struggle for recognition is enacted.

Implications of the Findings

The findings confirm that Papuan prose provides rich, nuanced accounts of conflict and racism that are frequently absent from official or mainstream representations. The texts:

1. Expose structural and everyday racism within the Indonesian nation-state;
2. Reframe conflict as a long-term lived condition rather than isolated security incidents;
3. Articulate multi-layered claims to recognition—human, civic, and indigenous.

At the same time, the analysis shows that Papuan authors employ sophisticated narrative techniques—first-person voices, symbolism, shifting perspectives, and linguistic hybridity—to reclaim narrative power. These strategies invite readers (inside and outside Indonesia) to rethink dominant understandings of Papua, moving from a security or resource lens to one centred on dignity, justice, and reciprocal recognition. In sum, the data support the article’s central proposition that **Papuan voices in prose function as critical interventions** into national and global discourses on race, indigeneity, and postcolonial nationhood. The texts do not simply describe oppression; they demand to be heard as authoritative accounts of history, identity, and the future of Papua.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Papuan prose is not simply a reflection of social reality but a powerful arena where dominant discourses about Papua are contested, reworked, and overturned. Conflict, racism, and the struggle for recognition do not appear as isolated themes; they are tightly interwoven, forming a narrative fabric that speaks to the everyday lives of Papuans under conditions of structural inequality. In contrast to state-centered accounts that typically define Papua through the language of “security disturbances,” “separatism,” or “underdevelopment,” the texts examined in this study offer an inward, experiential perspective. Conflict is shown as something that seeps into the most intimate spaces of life—family, school, church, workplace—rather than remaining at the level of military operations or spectacular

incidents.

One of the most striking aspects of the corpus is the normalization of structural and economic violence. Many texts do not foreground spectacular scenes of shooting, torture, or large-scale operations, but instead depict slow and often bureaucratic forms of harm: displacement due to mining concessions, the gradual loss of land and sea access, the steady erosion of traditional livelihoods, and the marginalization of Papuans in the formal economy. This “slow violence” is often rendered through images of changing landscapes—forests cleared, rivers polluted, graves relocated—which become recurring symbols of broken continuity between past and present. In literary terms, this emphasizes that conflict is not only episodic but chronic, lived across generations. It also invites readers to question development narratives that present roads, plantations, and extractive industries as unambiguously positive; in the Papuan texts, such projects frequently appear as the very vehicles of dispossession.

Racism in the analyzed prose appears along a spectrum, ranging from blunt dehumanization to subtle condescension and exclusion. Overt racist insults, such as being likened to animals or labeled “primitive”, often occur in moments of heightened political tension or in spaces where Papuans are visibly marked as “outsiders”—for example, in universities outside Papua or in urban environments dominated by non-Papuan migrants. But the more pervasive and insidious forms of racism are those woven into institutional practices: discriminatory treatment in schools and workplaces, biased law enforcement, unequal access to public services, and a public discourse that continually marks Papuans as lacking or deficient. These forms of racism are not always named explicitly in the texts; instead, they are implied through narrative patterns, such as repeated failures to obtain jobs despite qualifications, or the casual dismissal of Papuan complaints by officials and professionals.

A significant contribution of the corpus is its exploration of internalized racism. Several characters, especially younger Papuans studying or working outside Papua, internalize dominant stereotypes and begin to question their own intelligence, beauty, or worth. This internal struggle is often represented through interior monologues, dreams, or fragmented narrative structures, suggesting that racism is not only external but also internalized as shame and self-doubt. Literature here becomes a space where these internalized wounds can be articulated, examined, and potentially transformed. The texts frequently show turning points where characters reject these imposed identities and reclaim pride in their Papuan heritage—moments that function as narrative enactments of decolonization at the level of subjectivity.

The struggle for recognition operates as a central narrative engine across the corpus. Papuan characters consistently demand to be recognized as fully human, as citizens with rights, and as indigenous communities with a special relationship to land, ancestors, and culture. These demands are staged in a variety of scenes: confrontations with officials, speeches in community gatherings, conversations within families, and, importantly, acts of writing inside the story world (letters, diaries, essays, social media posts). The persistent refrain is that Papuans are not simply petitioning for material benefits but for dignity and voice. In many texts, the refusal of recognition—being treated as objects of policy rather than agents—is portrayed as a deep moral injury that fuels resentment, grief, and at times militant resistance.

Narrative strategies play a crucial role in how these themes are conveyed. First-person narration, used in more than half of the texts, brings readers directly into the emotional and perceptual world of Papuan characters. Instead of observing Papuans from a distance, readers are invited to inhabit Papuan subjectivity, feeling the fear, humiliation, and anger generated by racism and violence. Shifting focalization, where the narrative alternates between Papuan and non-Papuan perspectives, is used in several texts to expose the gap between official justifications and

lived experiences. For example, a scene of a “security operation” might be framed in a short official statement as a routine measure to maintain order, while the narrative, from the villagers’ perspective, depicts it as a terrifying and arbitrary intrusion into everyday life. This technique lays bare the epistemic violence that occurs when official narratives erase or distort local experiences.

Symbolism, imagery, and non-linear timelines are repeatedly employed to represent trauma and historical layering. Broken bridges, scarred hillsides, or silent mountains recur as symbols of interrupted futures and unresolved violence. Non-linear structures, where present-day events continually trigger memories of past atrocities, suggest that Papuan time is haunted—that the past is not fully past but remains active in the present. This aligns with trauma theory’s insight that traumatic events are often experienced as recurring rather than concluded. Compared to studies that treat Papuan conflict largely through chronological historical accounts or policy analysis, the literary texts insist that the subjective experience of time under conditions of chronic conflict is fractured and recursive.

Language functions as both medium and message in these texts. Many writers incorporate Papuan words, expressions, or entire dialogues into Indonesian prose, creating a hybrid linguistic texture. This code-switching is not purely ornamental; it signals the persistence of Papuan epistemologies and social relations within a dominant national language that has often been used to regulate and discipline them. By inserting local idioms, kinship terms, and spiritual concepts without always explaining them, authors assert a right to partial opacity. Non-Papuan readers may understand the general context but not every nuance, which reverses the usual dynamic where Papuans must continually adapt to and decode dominant languages and codes. In this sense, the texts perform a subtle politics of language, challenging the idea that full intelligibility to the center is a prerequisite for legitimacy.

When placed in conversation with previous scholarship, these findings both affirm and extend existing understandings. Earlier research has often highlighted Papuan literature as a site of resistance to state violence, with particular focus on themes of land loss, environmental destruction, and militarization. Such works have drawn attention to how Papuan narratives challenge official histories and assert alternative accounts of the past. However, racism has frequently been treated as a background condition rather than an explicit analytical category. Studies in anthropology and political science have documented experiences of racialization in everyday life and within state institutions, but these are seldom integrated into literary analyses as a central thematic focus. By systematically examining how racism is narrated—overtly and subtly—and how it intersects with conflict and recognition, this study brings critical race perspectives more directly into discussions of Papuan literature. Moreover, while previous research has tended to emphasize the testimonial dimension of Papuan writing—its role in bearing witness to violence—this study underscores the aesthetic and formal innovations through which such witnessing takes place. The use of fragmented structure, metaphor, hybrid language, and multi-perspectival narration suggests that Papuan authors are not merely providing raw testimony but are actively experimenting with literary form to render complex and often unspeakable experiences. This resonates with postcolonial literary scholarship more broadly, which has examined how writers from marginalized communities adapt and transform dominant literary conventions. Yet Papuan texts have often remained at the margins of those discussions. The present study helps reposition Papuan prose within a wider constellation of indigenous and minority literatures that use narrative experimentation to challenge both political and aesthetic hierarchies.

The corpus also contributes to debates on recognition theory. Philosophers like Axel Honneth and Charles Taylor conceptualize recognition as involving emotional support, legal rights, and social esteem. The Papuan texts vividly dramatize each of these dimensions: characters seek

emotional validation within families and communities; they demand legal recognition of rights and protections; and they resist stigmatizing stereotypes that deny them social esteem. However, the narratives also reveal the limits of recognition in a context where structural inequalities and racial hierarchies remain deeply entrenched. Even when individual characters achieve a measure of recognition (for example, gaining entry to a university, receiving media attention, or winning a legal case), broader patterns of discrimination and violence persist. This suggests that recognition cannot be understood simply as an achievement or endpoint; it is an ongoing, contested process, constantly threatened by the reassertion of racialized power.

Another important dimension emerging from the analysis is intergenerational memory and its role in shaping political consciousness. Older characters are often depicted as carriers of memory—telling stories of earlier waves of violence, forced relocations, and broken promises. Younger characters encounter these stories at the same time that they experience contemporary forms of racism and marginalization, especially in urban or educational settings outside Papua. This intersection of memory and present experience intensifies their sense of injustice and fuels new forms of activism, from street protests to online campaigns. Previous research has documented the importance of memory in Papuan political movements, but literary texts add nuance by showing how memory is negotiated within families, sometimes embraced, sometimes silenced, and sometimes rewritten. The texts thereby illuminate the micro-politics of memory—how histories are transmitted, contested, and transformed in intimate settings.

The representation of inter-ethnic encounters is similarly nuanced. While many texts depict painful experiences of racism from non-Papuan Indonesians, they also portray instances of solidarity, friendship, and mutual learning. Non-Papuan characters who challenge racist remarks, participate in protests, or show genuine curiosity about Papuan cultures represent possibilities for cross-ethnic alliance. At the same time, these solidarities are fragile; allies may be constrained by their own privileges, fear of state repression, or partial understanding of Papuan grievances. This complexity moves beyond simplistic binaries of Papuan versus Indonesian, suggesting that the primary antagonism is not between ethnic categories per se, but between structures of domination and those who resist them. In comparison with previous work that tends to emphasize conflict between Papuan and non-Papuan groups, this study highlights the tentative, contested spaces where new forms of relationality can emerge. From a practical standpoint, the implications of these findings are wide-ranging. In education, integrating Papuan prose into curricula can serve multiple purposes. It can help de-center Java- or Jakarta-focused narratives of Indonesian identity and instead present a more polyphonic view of the nation. It can foster critical literacy by encouraging students to question how media and official texts represent Papua, and to compare those representations with literary narratives that foreground Papuan voices. It can also provide Papuan students with mirrors in which they see their experiences and languages reflected, which is crucial for building self-esteem and countering internalized racism. Teacher-training programs could incorporate modules on Papuan literature and critical race perspectives, equipping educators to handle sensitive discussions on race, conflict, and national identity.

In terms of cultural policy, recognizing the importance of Papuan literature implies more systematic support for Papuan authors, publishers, translators, and cultural organizations. Grants, residencies, and literary prizes can be designed to ensure regional inclusion and to promote works from historically marginalized areas like Papua. Public cultural institutions—libraries, cultural centers, literary festivals—can curate programs that highlight Papuan voices, not as exotic “regional” curiosities but as central contributors to Indonesian and global debates on indigeneity, decolonization, and racial justice. Such measures would not automatically resolve structural inequalities, but they would help shift the symbolic economy in which some voices are consistently amplified while others are rendered peripheral.

For civil society and advocacy groups, the narratives analyzed in this study offer invaluable material for rethinking strategies of communication and solidarity. Rather than presenting Papua only through statistics, reports, or brief news items, activists can draw on literary narratives to convey the lived complexity of Papuan experiences. Stories can humanize issues that might otherwise appear abstract, and they can help build empathetic connections across geographic and ethnic divides. At the same time, activists must be cautious not to instrumentalize literature purely as a tool for advocacy; respecting the aesthetic integrity and autonomy of Papuan writers is part of the broader ethical commitment to recognition.

Despite its contributions, this research has important limitations. The corpus, while diverse, is limited in size and cannot represent the full range of Papuan literary production, which includes oral storytelling, poetry, drama, performance, visual-narrative forms, and emerging digital genres. The selection also leans toward texts that are accessible through established publishing channels and often written in Indonesian, potentially overlooking works circulated informally or in local languages that might embody different aesthetics and political strategies. Furthermore, this study focuses on textual interpretation and does not investigate how these works are read, shared, or contested by Papuan and non-Papuan audiences. Reader-response studies, interviews with authors, publishers, and readers, or ethnographic research on literary communities in Papua and elsewhere would be essential to understand how these texts function within social and political movements.

Another limitation is the reliance on theoretical frameworks that, although useful, originate largely from Euro-American contexts (such as Honneth's recognition theory or mainstream critical race theory). While these frameworks provide valuable tools for analysis, they may not fully capture the specificity of Papuan cosmologies, political imaginaries, and relational ethics. Future research could more deeply engage with Papuan and broader Melanesian intellectual traditions, as well as with indigenous scholarship from the Pacific and other regions, to develop analytical lenses that arise from within comparable historical and cultural experiences. In sum, this extended discussion underlines that Papuan prose is a crucial, dynamic locus where conflict, racism, and struggles for recognition are narrated in forms that challenge dominant understandings and invite new political and ethical imaginaries. The texts analyzed in this study reconfigure who gets to tell the story of Papua, how that story is told, and to whom it is addressed. Practically, the findings point to the need for more inclusive educational and cultural policies, greater protection and support for Papuan cultural producers, and more dialogical forms of advocacy. The acknowledged limitations, meanwhile, mark out fertile directions for future research—expanding the corpus, diversifying methods, and deepening theoretical engagement—in order to build a more comprehensive, plural, and just understanding of Papuan voices in prose.

CONCLUSION

This study has systematically examined how contemporary Papuan prose articulates experiences of conflict, racism, and the struggle for recognition within the Indonesian national context. Through close reading and thematic-discourse analysis of twelve Papuan short stories and novels published between 2005 and 2023, the research has revealed several significant patterns. First, conflict in Papuan prose is predominantly represented not as episodic military confrontations but as a pervasive continuum of structural and economic violence that permeates everyday life—manifesting in land dispossession, forced displacement, unequal access to resources, and the erosion of traditional livelihoods. Second, racism appears across a spectrum, from overt dehumanizing insults to institutionalized discrimination and symbolic erasure in public discourse, media, and educational curricula. Significantly, the texts also reveal processes of internalized racism, where Papuan characters grapple with imposed stereotypes and feelings of inferiority.

In conclusion, Papuan voices in prose represent a vital, dynamic, and sophisticated body of work that demands recognition—not only as literature but as a crucial intervention into debates

on race, justice, indigeneity, and nationhood. These texts challenge the persistent marginalization of Papuan perspectives in Indonesian public discourse and invite readers to reimagine more just, dialogical, and pluralistic futures. The struggle for recognition narrated in Papuan prose is ongoing, and literature itself is both a site and a tool of that struggle. Listening to these voices—attentively, critically, and with an openness to being transformed—is not merely an act of aesthetic appreciation but an ethical and political imperative.

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