

Revenge, Poverty, and Social Inequality in The Play Mega-Mega: A Review Of Literary Sociology

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ABSTRACT

Noer's Mega-Mega is a play that became a milestone in modern Indonesian theater, capturing the lives of marginalized communities with its insight and intelligence. This research explores the issues of poverty and social inequality, comparing conditions in the 1960s with the present. Using a sociological literary approach, data was collected through documentary studies through textual analysis. The aim of this research was to identify the "revenge of poverty" and the structure of social inequality experienced by the characters in Mega-Mega. The results of this study found that the revenge in this play does not appear as an anarchic physical act, but rather through a fantastical utopian escape as a form of escape from structural injustice. Through this research, it is hoped that the results of this research will encourage public awareness and sensitivity to the issues of poverty and social inequality, thus fostering concern and action to find solutions. This includes raising the awareness of stakeholders and policymakers (the government) to seriously implement Article 34 of the 1945 Constitution.

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Introduction

Literary works are related to elements that have a causal relationship and elements that are present simultaneously. The causal relationship is related to the elements of the speaker, the outside world, and the responder. Meanwhile, the elements that are present simultaneously encompass the presentation of language, aspects of meaning, messages and literary values (Aminuddin, 2011). Based on the principle that the explanation of a phenomenon (as an interpretation of the text) must refer to the objective conditions of real life, literary studies must ultimately have a target in the form of an explanation of the language used in the literary work.

Literature is a reflection and expression of the true reality of life (Damayanti, 2023). Literature is a medium for expressing inner experiences, values, ideas and thoughts about human life in various social and cultural situations (Nur et al., 2025). Aminuddin further

explained that literary works are a symptom of language communication. As a symptom of language communication, literary works are not a "material" form but a symptom that contains something else. This is stated because literary works that are objectively manifested in the form of language exposition are the result of the speaker's expression which also implies the presence of a second person as a reader or responder, in the context of a drama literary script, it is the audience. Expression is a psychological characteristic in humans that is used to determine a person's emotional state (Phetorant et al., 2026). This expression becomes a manifestation of the speaker's emotional turmoil towards social reality that stimulates personal awareness. With the depth of imagination, vision, assumptions, and intellectual level that he possesses, a speaker or author tries to depict the existing reality into a creative work. In relation to this, the author's awareness chose a literary work in the form of a drama script *Mega-Mega* by Arifin C. Noer as the object of research through a sociological approach to literature.

The drama *Mega-Mega* written in 1966 by Noer is one of the monumental works in the treasury of Indonesian drama literature. Noer's fame as a writer, playwright, and film director has made his works widely analyzed by academics. As analyzed by Sumantri (Sumantri, 2017) focuses on: a) poverty related to material depictions that include daily primary needs, such as clothing, food, shelter, health services, and education, social depictions that include social exclusion, dependency, and the inability to participate in society, and depictions of income or work that include a lack of adequate income and wealth; b) family disorganization related to the depiction of an incomplete family unit because a person's extramarital relationship fails to fulfill his or her social role, divorce, and family crises such as leaving the household, death, punishment, war and internal factors, namely the disruption of the mental balance of one of the family members.

Other research relevant to the author's research, such as that analyzed by Azzahrah using Ian Watt's sociological theory of literature, examines the relationship between social reality and the content of literary works, and how these works serve as a reflection and critique of the conditions of society at the time. The results of the study indicate that *Mega-Mega* not only serves as a medium of entertainment, but also as a powerful tool for social criticism of the inequalities and injustices that occur in society. Values such as life struggles, social concern, and hope are depicted through characters in the drama who live amidst social and economic pressures (Azzahrah et al., 2026).

Different focus from the two research results above, the author analyzes the play *Mega-Mega* by Noer on the emphasis of the social reality of marginalized communities read from two variables of poverty and social inequality based on the theory of literary sociology of Sapiro in the book *The Sociology of Literature* (Sapiro, 2023) and Sociologist David Harvey in the book *Rebel Cities* (Harvey, 2019). From these two theoretical approaches, the author intends to compare with the current social conditions of society in order to obtain its relevance in the present as a material for criticism and reminder for stakeholders and policy makers. This relevance is the main point of this research so as to motivate all stakeholders – including the Government – to be able to optimize the mandate of Article 34 of the 1945 Constitution.

Method

The method used in this research is qualitative. Mantopani explains that the main data sources in qualitative research are words (descriptive) and actions (Mantopani et al., 2023). The approach used in researching the play *Mega-Mega* by Noer attempts to dissect and expose the social structure of the characters' lives through analysis of the script text. Based on Iser's theory which is text-centered and emphasizes the important role of the reader in creating meaning (Yurdakul, 2024). As a mirror and reflection of society, the play *Mega-*

Mega provides a picture of the social conditions at the time the play was created. Literature not only influences society but also receives influence from society. Using a sociological approach to literature as defined above, the author examines the texts in the play Mega-Mega, both in the form of haupttext (dialogue/monologue/conversation) and in the form of nebentext (annotation/sidenotes/technical instructions). The analysis focuses on explicit and implicit texts that identify the "revenge of poverty" and social inequality.

Results and Discussion

1. Noer

Noer is known as a playwright who skillfully presents the personification of the common people crushed by the pace of modern life. In the play Mega-Mega, we are presented with not only a portrait of physical poverty, but also a psychological one. A prominent symptom is what can be termed "poverty revenge." Revenge here is the attitude of the characters in Mega-Mega to the pressures of life that make them miserable. It is the system that creates a gap between the poverty of the characters in Mega-Mega and the wealthy people in the city where they live. Social inequality in this play is depicted as a wall that is impossible to jump or impenetrable, except through "dreams" which are the product of the characters' main actions. Dreams find pleasure through winning the lottery (a gambling game involving numbers), as stated in the main text of Mega-Mega below:

KOYAL: Hooray!! I won the lottery!! Hooray (silence) Daydreaming alone is no fun. It's more fun if I wake everyone up. Everyone (screaming) Hoooooooooooooooooooo!!! Koyal won!!! I won the lotteryeeeeeeeeee!!! (laughs) I'll just wake those people up. (Koyal stops playing the flute). Mae, look (shows the lottery and the torn newspaper) I won. Read it. Come on, read it. Same, right?

MAE : Mae can't read.

KOYAL: Mae just say it. Koyal won!

MAE : Koyal won! Oh, yes. Koyal won!"

KOYAL: (laughs) Hooray! Koyal won!!!!

The Mega-Mega play script is a script that is very close to life around us. The storyline presented is able to reveal the social conditions, the conscience of some of the lower classes, especially the homeless who do not receive real attention from government policies. The delivery of meaning and expression of a script through intrinsic and extrinsic elements will be more felt when realized in a theatrical performance. Theater plays a significant role in the life of society, especially as a medium for conveying social criticism. Awuy (2004) said that art has concrete benefits from the perspective of therapy, education, and entertainment.

When viewed from a theatrical perspective, a literary work's imagination and creativity are influenced by the text, context, and intrinsic and extrinsic elements within the script. Dialogues are not the only focus, but also the essence of each word, event, conflict, character, and even the setting. In literary texts, plot can be better understood through motifs, the reasons for an event. Motives in the drama Mega-Mega are even more important because they were the focus of the playwright's attention when writing the play. A literary text cannot be concluded simply by reading it from a theatrical perspective or through the reader's imagination. Therefore, a literary work should not only be viewed as a text that complements the work, but also as its content and meaning. When uncovering the meaning of the play Mega-Mega through main text and nebentext analysis, the author identified factors of social inequality and the resentment of poverty.

2. Social Inequality as a Liminal Space

Mega-Mega is a social reality drama that highlights the lives of a group of homeless people living under a banyan tree. The main setting in Mega-Mega is indeed the open garden courtyard beneath the banyan tree. Here is an excerpt from the nebentext of Mega-Mega, which shows the setting and events:

Moments before the screen is removed, a young woman can be heard singing a Javanese song. The audience then watches as the young woman sings with great passion, standing and leaning against the old, wrinkled banyan tree trunk.

This place serves as a symbol of Liminal Space. According to Stenner (Stenner, 2024), Liminal Space depicts a transitional phase or a person's "between" position during a rite of passage. The "in-between" position of the Mega-Mega characters illustrates the paradox of remaining space in the midst of a magnificent city. This demonstrates the social inequality in this play, evident in spatial marginalization and economic uncertainty.

Spatial marginalization is a form of structural injustice in which certain groups of people are marginalized, excluded, or geographically placed in disadvantaged, isolated, or uninhabitable areas. The characters in the play Mega-Mega, namely: Mae, Koyal, Retno, Hamung, Tukijan, and Panut, live in the heart of the city but do not have access to city facilities. They are marginalized by urban development policies that do not favor the poor. In David Harvey's terms, capitalism produces space and marginalizes certain groups through processes he calls spatial fix and accumulation by dispossession.

In the context of the economic uncertainty experienced by the Mega-Mega characters, we are presented with a life dependent on gambling on the lottery and the mercy of others. This is a clear indication of the state's absence in implementing social security policies for the lower classes. Below is a central excerpt from the main text that places the hope of survival on the mercy of others:

PANUT: That's enough. That's what I call success. Tomorrow morning I'll start.

MAE : Start what?

PANUT: Begging

MAE : Oh my God

PANUT: What's wrong?

MAE : Panut! If you were my son, I'd have plucked your ear. Your muscles are still strong, and your body is still intact. You want to beg like an old man who's left alone? Oh no. Your legs will rot if you don't use them for work.

PANUT: Begging is also work. Do you think begging is easy? It takes energy and emotions too. That's not it. I'm unlucky. And it's about food, not emotions.

3. Poverty Revenge as Self Defense

The "revenge of poverty" in Mega-Mega emerges through a defense mechanism within each character. In the context of Mega-Mega, "revenge" here does not mean a desire to physically harm the rich, but rather a form of psychological escape from an unfair fate. The characters take "revenge" against the harsh realities they face. The characters experience immense economic pressure. This pressure leads them to create new realities (dreams). They vent this revenge through dreams. As one of the nebenscene excerpts from Mega-Mega below:

After Retno left, Mae was gripped by a lonely atmosphere. She looked around: darkness and silence. She shivered. Cold. Afraid. Strange. A strong wind blew past. She smiled when her eyes met the plump moon in the sky. And she entertained herself with fantasies. Suddenly, she became angry. She imagined herself digging up the moon.

Self-defense among the poor is a strategy for surviving under limitations. It also serves as a form of self-empowerment to escape the pressures of poverty. However, in the reality of the play Mega-Mega, self-defense through dreams is a temporary escape that doesn't change the reality.

4. Poverty Revenge as Self Defense

Koyal as a Symbol of Empty Hope. The name "Koyal" itself is said to refer to "imagination." Koyal is the driving force behind this revenge against poverty. For him, daydreaming is the only way to stay sane.

MAE : Indeed. Usually, Koyal keeps interrupting us when we're having a great conversation.

HAMUNG : I'm sure. He's crazy. He wants to be rich to death.

PANUT : His dreams are sky-high.

HAMUNG : The funny thing is, he just wants to have a lot of money. But the crazy thing is, he doesn't want to work at all. He just begs.

The quote from the play *Mega-Mega* above gives the impression of Koyal's character as a dreamer, living in a fantasy world. By daydreaming, Koyal feels he has "victorized" fate. Koyal is the ultimate embodiment of this resentment. His obsession with winning the lottery is not simply about getting rich, but about reversing his social status. His penchant for imagining buying tall buildings is a form of "revenge" against the city that has rejected him. As in Act Two of *Mega-Mega*, Koyal dreams of winning the lottery:

KOYAL : (stops playing the flute) Mae, look (shows the lottery ticket and the torn newspaper) I won. Read it. Come on, read it. Is it the same?

MAE : Mae can't read.

KOYAL : Mae, just say it. Koyal won!

MAE : Koyal won! Oh, yeah. Koyal won!

KOYAL : (laughs) Hooray! Koyal won!!!

Koyal's obsession with purchasing tall buildings is a form of resistance against a city that considers them "visual trash." By possessing buildings in his imagination, he reverses his position from being an expelled subject to becoming an owner of the space.

KOYAL : Money! Money! Money! (laughs) Let's go to the bank now.

RETNO : What time is it? (The palace bells chime three times.)

RETNO : It's already closed.

KOYAL : You don't care. Is that right, Mung?

HAMUNG : I see.

KOYAL : Here we go, dear moon (to Retno) Yes. No matter if it closes, no matter if it opens. Money, our money. If necessary, we'll buy the bank. Agree, Mung?

HAMUNG : Agree

Koyal is more than just a vagrant; he is a poet of his own destiny. Koyal's character represents the psychological condition of the lower classes, who experience total alienation from the social system. Koyal uses fantasy formation to protect his soul from the destruction of an overwhelming reality. For him, winning the lottery is the only bridge to complete humanity.

5. Mae in the Vortex of Poverty

Mae acts as a social glue among the homeless. Her resentment is more passive. Mae harbors bitterness over the fact that her "children" have no future. Mae allows (and even facilitates) her foster children to drown in dreams as a means of survival. If Koyal is imagination, then Mae is structure. Mae acts as a mother figure who tries to organize the chaos of the homeless' lives into a "family."

MAE : You can't say Koyal won the lottery. Here you have to say: We won the lottery (shouting) We won the lottery!!!

KOYAL : That's right (shouting) Hooray!!! We won the lottery!!! (laughing)

MAE : You have to shout that too, Retno.

HAMUNG: Yes, you too, Retno.

KOYAL : You too, Hamung.

MAE : Also Tukijan

Mae attempts to recreate domestic functions in a public space (the garden under the banyan tree). She organizes, scolds, and nurtures other characters as if they were a biological family unit. Mae seeks to create a social microcosm for collective survival. Yalom argues that (small) social groups become microcosms where members practice their interpersonal behavior (Shahar, 2022). This is a psychological and social survival

mechanism where individuals learn to adapt to the larger environment. In Yalom's view, social microcosms help individuals overcome existential anxieties, such as the fear of death or loneliness (existential isolation). By creating deep relationships within the group, members feel a connection that validates their existence, making the burdens of life feel lighter and more bearable through togetherness.

MAE: Who said that? Mae never takes responsibility. Now here Mae is trying to be your mother. One of you is heading to prison without her realizing it. Should Mae just stay silent? You know? He is the only one Mae hopes for besides Koyal. Hamung, you go to Jakarta tomorrow. Maybe Tukijan too. And then Retno. And if Mae lets Panut go to prison and Koyal goes somewhere else, what will happen to Mae? Going back to Tegal? That place is no longer Mae's place... There is no place. Mae will return to the way she was when she first came here. Alone. Dry.

Despite her harsh environment, Mae maintains traditional moral values. She frequently serves as a reminder to other characters (such as Hamung or Koyal) on how to behave. This demonstrates that, despite being cast down from the social hierarchy, Mae strives to maintain her "humanity" and avoid falling into animalistic behavior.

6. Dreams of the Homeless as a Tool of Resistance

From a sociological perspective, the dreams of the Mega-Mega figures are a form of symbolic resistance. When access to power and wealth is structurally blocked, the mind becomes the only territory free from colonization.

KOYAL: (smiling grandly) Oh, yes (to Mae) Mae, hurry up and walk a little so you don't lose the sun. If you miss it, our party will be in vain. Now, take your seats. Hamung, be a little polite. Manners are necessary for anyone who has wealth. And us? Rich. Noble. Understand? (about to sit) Excuse me, sir (sit) Retno is beside me. The others are in the same row. (silence) Don't go yet, sir. Watch our party first -- Eat again? That's fine. As much as you like (laughs) The world is ours. We own everything (laughs) Go ahead, go ahead. Please. See you. If you have trouble with money, just come to me, sir. Our house is in... (to Mae) Where, Mae?

MAE : It's just being built tomorrow. It's done tomorrow.

KOYAL: It's just being built. It's done tomorrow. (laughs) Go ahead. Go ahead.

The imaginary "party" scene where the Mega-Mega characters participate is the climax of the play. There, social inequalities are dissolved. They play the roles of officials, kings, and wealthy individuals.

RETNO: (nervous and happy) Good evening, taokeh.

KOYAL: Don't call it taokeh. We are buyers.

MAE : Good morning, sir.

KOYAL: Are we his slaves? And now it's not time for the sun to show itself. If it had, our power would have ended. (by humiliating the Chinese man and holding his shoulder) Good evening approaching morning. Heh, good evening approaching morning. (The Chinese man frees himself from Koyal's hand) What? Polite? -- You are not my slave -- (cruel) Yes, you were not my slave earlier. But in a few minutes you are my slave. I have enough money in my hands to make anyone my slave -- Don't lecture me about politeness. I know I'm rich. And I know that politeness is only the absolute property of the rich and I...

However, Noer cleverly points out that even in their dreams, they still carry the trauma of poverty. This trauma is evident when they are nervous when facing an imaginary bank director, an imaginary shop owner, or when they lack the polite and elegant demeanor of those with plenty of money.

RETNO : After eating, of course we have to think about clothes.

HAMUNG : Your mind is very agile.

KOYAL : Yes, to complete our manners, we have to dress ourselves in sparkling clothes so that everything is neatly hidden.

RETNO : We're going to Kim Sin's shop.

KOYAL : We're buying everything there is

The text above can be interpreted as social criticism. The scenes in the play "Mega-Mega" essentially criticize how materialism diminishes human worth. Human behavior becomes controlled by worldly desires. Possessions lead people to become heartless creatures. However, the play "Mega-Mega" also encourages the audience (society) to care more about marginalized groups, such as the homeless.

7. The Relevance of Mega-Mega in Today's Life

Although written 60 years ago, the themes of Mega-Mega, concerning social inequality and the struggles of the lower classes, remain highly relevant to today's modernization. Comparing the living conditions in Mega-Mega with Indonesia's current social reality provides an interesting perspective. Although times have changed from the physical to the digital era, the essence of poverty and social inequality portrayed by Noer remains relevant, even though its manifestations have shifted.

A comparison of characteristics reviewed from the shift of time (from the Mega-Mega era to the present) can be compared through the dimensions of the form of fantasy, the main enemy, inequality, and social response. In the form of fantasy, in the Mega-Mega era it took the form of lotteries, prophecies, dreams of becoming king, while in the current era it takes the form of flexing, slot gambling, fraudulent investments. The main enemies of the Mega-Mega era were hunger and the public order police, now it is algorithms, education/healthcare costs, and inflation. The realm of inequality, clearly visible in the Mega-Mega era in the form of buildings and huts in the park, and in the current reality, lifestyles confront the reality of financial balance. Meanwhile, in the dimension of social response, in Mega-Mega still visible togetherness and full of family, while now strong individualism and fragile mental health are evident. This comparison serves as a critical force of the Mega-Mega play that transcends the dimensions of space and time. The content of meaning as a moral message of the Mega-Mega drama script can be a reflection of contemporary life phenomena.

The play "Mega-Mega" remains timeless. It captures the psychology of the poor in the face of injustice. If Mae were alive today, she might not be sitting under a banyan tree, but rather admin of a WhatsApp group for a family trapped in online loan debt. Mae continues to weave "mega-mega" as hope for her foster children amidst the onslaught of an increasingly materialistic world and the current global crisis caused by the war in the Middle East. The grudge of poverty today is no longer simply the desire for good food and decent clothing, but rather the resentment of feeling left behind by the standards of living constantly flaunted globally, especially through advertising and social media.

Furthermore, if we want to criticize the implementation of Article 34 of the 1945 Constitution, which mandates the state to care for the poor and neglected children, provide health/public facilities, and develop a social security system, in reality, this is not yet optimal. The state's presence in protecting vulnerable groups and efforts to achieve social justice still faces many obstacles. Based on the latest data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) for February-March 2026, although the national poverty rate was recorded as decreasing, issues regarding the high number of poor people (8.25%), limited employment opportunities (7.35 million people are still unemployed), and the rising cost of living (the cost of a decent living in 2024 reached IDR 1.66 million per month per person) remain significant structural challenges.

Research by Sulistiyono states that child protection policies aim to guarantee the rights of children – especially neglected children – to live, grow, and develop optimally, and to be protected from violence, discrimination, and neglect (Sulistiyono et al., 2025). Therefore, comprehensive policy reform is needed, focusing on family and community empowerment, the provision of rehabilitation services, law enforcement, and broad public education. Lack

of information about their rights makes many vulnerable citizens, especially homeless people (as experienced by the characters in the play Mega-Mega) who do not get the access to assistance they should.

Conclusion

The play Mega-Mega emphasizes that poverty is not merely a matter of food, clothing, and shelter, but rather a matter of wounded human dignity. The "revenge of poverty" that arises from the destitution experienced by the characters in Mega-Mega is a form of structural social inequality. Noer critiques modern society by showing that for marginalized communities, the homeless, the only way to "win" against the system is to build an alternative reality (a dream) – even if it is only a mirage or a "mega-mega" that can easily disappear. The play Mega-Mega seems to mandate that: "we never get, but always feel lost. Mega-Mega shows that extreme poverty can damage human reason. Noer geniusly said that for those oppressed by the misery of life and social inequality, dreams are the only treasure - happiness that cannot be confiscated by the state or stolen by the rich. However, these dreams also become "mega-mega" (clouds) that cover the reality that they remain at the lowest point of life. The upper class society or the government system in this play is often depicted as the other, distant and unreachable. The homeless in Mega-Mega are like visual trash for the city's rapid development. The author hopes that the Government can optimize the mandate of Article 34 of the 1945 Constitution as a form of implementing the fifth principle of Pancasila, namely, Social justice for all Indonesian people.

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