
UNIVERSALITY AND CONTEXTUALITY OF JUSTICE "THE LEGEND OF TOBA" AND "A LIFETIME OF INJUSTICE"

Oleh

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Abstract: *This article examines the cultural construction of justice through a comparative literary analysis of two texts from different traditions: the Indonesian folktale The Legend of Toba and the contemporary American memoir A Lifetime of Injustice by Jessica Neyhouse. Using the methods of literary comparison and cultural hermeneutics, the study reveals how each narrative encodes justice in culturally specific ways—through cosmological punishment and ancestral norms in The Legend of Toba, and through socio-political critique and racial consciousness in A Lifetime of Injustice. Despite their differences, both texts emphasize universal moral themes such as betrayal, accountability, and the pursuit of justice. The findings support the argument that literature not only reflects cultural values but also facilitates dialogue between particular and universal ethical visions*

PENDAHULUAN

Justice is one of the oldest and most widely valued ideas across different cultures, but its meaning is still widely debated, especially in academic circles. This study explores whether justice is truly a universal concept by comparing two very different stories: the Indonesian folktale *The Legend of Toba* and the American memoir *A Lifetime of Injustice* by Jessica Neyhouse. These two texts come from different countries, time periods, and genres, making them ideal for examining how justice is understood and shaped by culture.

In the field of comparative literature, there's an ongoing debate between the idea of shared human values and the belief that each culture has its own moral standards. Scholars like Nussbaum (1997) argue that some ethical principles are universal, while others, like Spivak (1988), emphasize the uniqueness of each cultural context. This study joins that conversation by showing how literature both reflects and helps form different cultural views of justice—while also pointing out a few values that may cross cultural boundaries.

The Legend of Toba, based on Batak oral tradition, presents justice as something tied to the natural and spiritual world. When Toba breaks a sacred promise to his wife, the result is a major natural event—the creation of Lake Toba. This aligns with how many traditional societies view justice: as something connected to ritual purity and divine punishment (Douglas, 1966). On the other hand, *A Lifetime of Injustice* sees justice through a modern

American lens, focusing on racism, everyday discrimination, and the failures of social institutions. The book discusses issues like white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) and performative allyship, which reflect more current Western ideas of social justice.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a comparative literary analysis approach combined with cultural hermeneutics to examine the construction of justice concepts in two texts from distinct traditions. The Legend of Toba is analyzed as a representation of Batak oral literature, with particular emphasis on its mythological structure and cultural symbolism, while A Lifetime of Injustice is interpreted as an autobiographical narrative reflecting discourses on racial justice in contemporary American contexts. The analytical methods include: (1) close reading of narrative elements and key themes (such as retribution in Toba and microaggressions in Injustice), (2) textual contextualization through anthropological lenses (particularly Batak value systems) and critical race theory, and (3) comparative analysis of narrative patterns to identify conceptual similarities and differences. This approach is supported by Propp (1968) theoretical framework on folktale structures and Appiah (2006) concept of literary cosmopolitanism, while remaining attentive to Spivak's (1988) critique of universalism in postcolonial discourse.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Conceptions of Justice Across Cultural Frameworks

This comparative analysis reveals that the concept of justice is deeply influenced by cultural frameworks, shaped by distinct worldviews, social norms, and historical experiences. In The Legend of Toba, justice is depicted as a sacred cosmological order. Violations against divine or ancestral principles—such as Toba's betrayal of his wife's sacred trust—are punished not through human law but by supernatural forces, exemplified in the formation of Lake Toba. This reflects the traditional Batak worldview, in which nature, myth, and morality are interwoven, and justice is rendered through divine retribution as a means of restoring balance.

Conversely, A Lifetime of Injustice portrays justice as a human-centered, socio-political struggle, grounded in the modern American context of racial discourse. The memoir highlights systemic injustices such as institutional racism, microaggressions, and performative allyship, emphasizing the need for activism, recognition, and reform. Justice in this narrative is procedural and restorative, framed within legal, social, and psychological domains.

2. Shared Themes: Betrayal and Redemption

Despite their cultural divergence, both texts explore the central theme of betrayal. In The Legend of Toba, the betrayal of a sacred vow leads to cosmic punishment, while in A Lifetime of Injustice, betrayal arises from the marginalization and neglect experienced by minority communities, often at the hands of supposedly supportive institutions or individuals. However, the outcomes and resolutions in each narrative differ significantly. In Toba, betrayal results in irreversible divine retribution, while in Injustice, betrayal gives rise to demands for accountability and transformative change within a democratic framework.

This contrast illustrates how a shared theme can be articulated through different ethical logics—fatalistic in the former, reformatory in the latter.

3. Structural and Temporal Differences

The narrative structure of *The Legend of Toba*, which follows Propp's morphology of folktales, employs symbolic characters and mythic causality to dramatize moral violations. It lacks psychological introspection but conveys collective norms and spiritual warnings. In contrast, *A Lifetime of Injustice* adopts a reflective, confessional, and deeply personal style, characteristic of contemporary Western memoir. This difference suggests that narrative form plays a significant role in shaping the portrayal of justice—folktales emphasize collective moral clarity, whereas memoirs pursue personal and social transformation.

4. Cultural Values and the Idea of Justice

The Legend of Toba implicitly upholds cultural values such as communal harmony, obedience to divine law, and reverence for ancestors, all of which are central to Batak society. The resolution of the story (the transformation of the landscape) reflects a justice that is externalized and symbolic. Meanwhile, Neyhouse's memoir emphasizes values such as equality, critical awareness, and individual agency, suggesting that justice must be actively pursued through consciousness and social action.

5. Points of Convergence

Interestingly, both texts emphasize that justice involves acknowledging wrongdoing and having the courage to face its consequences. Both narratives also underscore the importance of truth, whether in the form of a broken sacred vow or unacknowledged racial bias. This reveals a potential transcultural value—the necessity of moral reckoning and transformation, even though the means of achieving justice may differ across cultural and historical contexts.

CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis shows that even though justice is a shared human goal, the way people understand and express it depends a lot on their culture, history, and how stories are told. *The Legend of Toba* shows justice from a traditional Batak perspective, where it's deeply connected to nature, spiritual beliefs, and myths. On the other hand, *A Lifetime of Injustice* presents a modern Western view, where justice is about civil rights, challenging unfair systems, and personal experiences. Even though the two stories come from very different places and times, they both deal with similar ideas—like betrayal, truth, and the need to take responsibility. Both make it clear that justice can't happen without first facing the wrongs that have been done. While *The Legend of Toba* gives us a collective and symbolic ending based on ancestral wisdom, *A Lifetime of Injustice* pushes for individual awareness and social change based on modern critical thinking.

In the end, this study proves that literature does more than just mirror culture—it helps us think through ethical questions that all humans face. By comparing these two stories, we see that justice might not mean exactly the same thing everywhere, but the desire for fairness and accountability is something people everywhere care about. Literature helps us better understand how different cultures deal with these issues, and also reminds us of the values we all share.

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