

Narrating Marginalized Education in Andrea Hirata's Laskar Pelangi: A Critical Book Review

¹Nor Elisa Ariyanti, ²Nadia J bissi

¹⁻²*Universitas K.H. Abdul Chalim (Indonesia), ¹MA Darussalam Daun (Indonesia), ²MA
Al-Khairat Labuha (Indonesia)*

norelisaariyanti@gmail.com

Submitted: Januari 2026

Accepted: February 2026

Published: July 2026

Book Information

Laskar Pelangi was written by Andrea Hirata and first published in 2005 by Bentang Pustaka, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The novel comprises 529 pages in its original Indonesian edition and belongs to the genre of semi-autobiographical fiction. It is the first installment of the Laskar Pelangi tetralogy, followed by Sang Pemimpi, Edensor, and Maryamah Karpov. The narrative is set in Belitung Island during the 1970s and draws heavily from the author's own childhood experiences. The story centers on ten underprivileged students and their two dedicated teachers at a small Muhammadiyah elementary school that struggles to survive amid economic hardship and institutional neglect. Written in Indonesian, the novel combines realistic social commentary with inspirational storytelling, addressing themes of education, poverty, social inequality, friendship, and resilience. Since its publication, Laskar Pelangi has gained national and international recognition, has been translated into multiple languages, and was adapted into a successful film in 2008.

Keywords: *Fiction, Inspirational, Educational*

INTRODUCTION

Laskar Pelangi by Andrea Hirata is one of the most influential works in contemporary Indonesian literature. First published in 2005, the novel presents a compelling narrative rooted in the author's semi-autobiographical experiences growing up on Belitung Island during the 1970s. Beyond a simple coming-of-age story, the novel explores structural poverty, social inequality, and limited access to education in marginalized communities. Through vivid storytelling and emotionally resonant characters, Hirata portrays education not merely as institutional learning but as a transformative force capable of reshaping destinies. The novel's popularity has extended beyond Indonesia, attracting international readers and contributing to discussions about global educational disparities.

Thematically, Laskar Pelangi foregrounds resilience, hope, solidarity, and the power of dreams amid socioeconomic hardship. Set in a modest Muhammadiyah elementary school on the brink of closure due to low enrollment and poor facilities, the narrative highlights how determination and mentorship can flourish even in adverse conditions. The characters—especially Ikal, the reflective narrator, and Lintang, the prodigious yet underprivileged student—embody intellectual potential constrained by social realities. By combining humor, nostalgia, and social critique, Hirata constructs a narrative that is both inspirational and critical, making the novel highly relevant for literary and educational discourse, including in English language and literature studies.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

Laskar Pelangi tells the story of ten elementary school children in Gantung Village, Belitung, known as "Laskar Pelangi." They attend Muhammadiyah Elementary School, which was almost closed due to the small number of students. With the support of teachers such as Mrs. Muslimah and Mr. Harfan, the students continue to pursue education despite

limited facilities and poverty. A new student, Harun, arrives as the tenth student, saving the school from closure. Throughout their learning journey, they face challenges, hard work, friendship, and inspiring moments that shape their character and life.

The novel centers on Ikal and nine other children who enroll at SD Muhammadiyah Gantong, a small, underfunded school in Belitung. On the first day of enrollment, the school faces imminent closure because it lacks the minimum number of students required to operate. Tension builds as the teachers and the few enrolled children anxiously wait for one more student to arrive. Their relief comes when the tenth student finally appears, allowing the school to remain open. This group of ten children later earns the nickname “Laskar Pelangi” (The Rainbow Troops), given by their beloved teacher due to their shared fascination with rainbows after rainfall. From the outset, the novel paints a stark picture of the school’s fragile wooden building, inadequate facilities, and the broader economic hardships faced by the students’ families, many of whom work as laborers in the local tin-mining industry. Despite these limitations, the children’s enthusiasm for learning remains remarkably strong, nurtured by the dedication and moral guidance of their teachers, Bu Mus and Pak Harfan.

Among the students, Lintang emerges as the most intellectually gifted. He travels an extraordinary distance by bicycle every day, often facing dangerous conditions, including encounters with wildlife, simply to attend school. His brilliance in mathematics and analytical reasoning distinguishes him from his peers and even from students in more privileged institutions. Mahar, on the other hand, represents creativity and artistic imagination, often challenging conventional definitions of intelligence. Ikal, serving as the narrator, offers reflective insights into their shared experiences, blending childlike wonder with mature contemplation. Through these diverse personalities, the novel constructs a multifaceted portrayal of childhood shaped by adversity yet illuminated by friendship and ambition. A significant source of tension in the narrative arises from the stark contrast between the impoverished Muhammadiyah school and the well-funded PN Timah school, supported by the state-owned tin mining company. This institutional disparity symbolizes broader social inequality. A pivotal moment occurs during an academic competition in which Lintang successfully defeats students from the elite school, demonstrating that intellectual excellence is not determined by economic privilege. However, this triumph is overshadowed by tragedy when Lintang is forced to abandon his education following his father’s death, as he must assume responsibility for supporting his family. This turning point underscores the harsh realities that disrupt even the most promising aspirations and highlights the fragile intersection between talent and opportunity.

In its concluding sections, the novel reflects on the long-term trajectories of the Rainbow Troops. While some members manage to pursue further education and improve their socioeconomic conditions, others remain constrained by circumstance. Ikal himself eventually continues his studies abroad, carrying with him the formative memories of his childhood struggles and friendships. The narrative closes on a contemplative tone, affirming education as a beacon of hope capable of transforming lives, even though access to it remains unequal. Ultimately, *Laskar Pelangi* offers a poignant meditation on perseverance, collective solidarity, and the enduring power of dreams in the face of systemic limitation.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

Laskar Pelangi offers a compelling intersection between literary narrative and social critique, particularly in its exploration of educational inequality and class disparity

in peripheral Indonesia. Andrea Hirata effectively employs a semi-autobiographical approach that enhances authenticity while maintaining narrative engagement. One of the novel's strongest elements lies in its characterization, especially through Lintang, whose intellectual brilliance sharply contrasts with his socioeconomic limitations. This juxtaposition functions as a critique of structural injustice, illustrating how systemic poverty curtails opportunity regardless of talent. The narrative voice, mediated through Ikal's reflective perspective, allows the story to move fluidly between childhood innocence and adult retrospection, producing emotional depth without losing analytical resonance. Furthermore, the symbolic contrast between the impoverished Muhammadiyah school and the privileged PN Timah institution successfully exposes institutional inequality, making the novel highly relevant for discussions in postcolonial and educational literary studies.

Nevertheless, the novel presents certain critical limitations. At times, its inspirational tone risks romanticizing hardship, potentially simplifying the structural complexities of poverty and educational marginalization. While primary characters are vividly constructed, several secondary figures function more as narrative devices than psychologically nuanced individuals. In addition, the oscillation between humor, nostalgia, and social criticism occasionally creates uneven pacing, which may disrupt thematic cohesion. From a broader critical lens, the novel could have engaged more explicitly with gender perspectives and macro-political structures that sustain inequality. Despite these shortcomings, the work remains a significant literary contribution due to its emotional impact, accessible language, and enduring thematic relevance. Ultimately, *Laskar Pelangi* succeeds not only as a coming-of-age narrative but also as a subtle yet powerful social commentary on resilience, aspiration, and the transformative potential of education.

REFLECTION & CONCLUSION

Reading *Laskar Pelangi* teaches that even in difficult situations, a strong desire to learn and collaborate with others can help overcome challenges. The story inspires me to appreciate the learning opportunities I have and to remain positive when facing difficulties. *Laskar Pelangi* is an inspiring novel about the struggle for education, the value of friendship, and the importance of perseverance and hard work. The novel is suitable for both teenagers and adults who wish to be reminded of important life values.

REFERENCE

Hirata, A. (2005). *Laskar Pelangi*. Bentang Pustaka.