

ORIGINAL

Reading Race Across Borders: Indonesian Reception of African-American Literature in a Postcolonial Frame

Leer la raza a través de las fronteras: La recepción indonesia de la literatura afroamericana en un marco poscolonial

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: this study examines how Indonesian readers interpret racial issues in African American literature.

Objective: the research analyses patterns of reader reception using Robert Jauss's reception theory and postcolonial perspectives from Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, focusing on how readers construct meanings related to race, identity, and power.

Method: a mixed-methods design was used. Data were collected through an online questionnaire completed by 250 university students from ten universities, followed by semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data captured general tendencies, while qualitative data explored deeper interpretive processes.

Results: quantitative findings show strong interest in African American literature. Most respondents were attracted to themes of racial inequality and cultural identity (93,6 %), cultural representations of resilience (88,4 %), and emotionally engaging narratives (79,2 %). A desire to read more works was also prominent (92,8 %). Readers responded positively to cultural diversity in the texts (85,6 %). Postcolonial awareness was evident through understanding of slavery and colonialism (88,4 %), recognition of their role in shaping identity (96,4 %), and links to ongoing structural racism (89,6 %). They also viewed literature as resistance (84,4 %) and supported non-Western perspectives (80,4 %). Transnational awareness emerged through empathy for racial struggles (95,6 %), motivation to resist injustice (70,8 %), and feelings of cross-cultural solidarity (92,4 %). Qualitative data show that readers relate racial narratives to Indonesian inequalities, use local culture to interpret power, critique Western dominance, and link global racial issues to their own lives.

Conclusions: Indonesian readers use African American literature to build empathy, critical literacy, and postcolonial awareness, supporting cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords: Literary Reception; Postcolonialism; African American Literature; Transnational Consciousness.

RESUMEN

Introducción: este estudio examina cómo los lectores indonesios interpretan los problemas raciales en la literatura afroamericana.

Objetivo: la investigación analiza los patrones de recepción de los lectores utilizando la teoría de la recepción de Robert Jauss y perspectivas poscoloniales de Edward Said y Homi Bhabha, centrándose en cómo los lectores construyen significados relacionados con raza, identidad y poder.

Método: se empleó un diseño de métodos mixtos. Los datos se recopilaron mediante un cuestionario

en línea completado por 250 estudiantes universitarios de diez universidades, seguido de entrevistas semiestructuradas. Los datos cuantitativos capturaron tendencias generales, mientras que los cualitativos exploraron procesos interpretativos más profundos.

Resultados: los hallazgos cuantitativos muestran un gran interés en la literatura afroamericana. La mayoría de los participantes se sintieron atraídos por los temas de desigualdad racial e identidad cultural (93,6 %), las representaciones culturales de resiliencia (88,4 %) y las narrativas emocionalmente atractivas (79,2 %). También se destacó el deseo de leer más obras (92,8 %). Los lectores respondieron positivamente a la diversidad cultural en los textos (85,6 %). La conciencia poscolonial se evidenció en la comprensión de la esclavitud y el colonialismo (88,4 %), el reconocimiento de su papel en la formación de la identidad (96,4 %) y las conexiones con el racismo estructural actual (89,6 %). También vieron la literatura como una forma de resistencia (84,4 %) y apoyaron perspectivas no occidentales (80,4 %). La conciencia transnacional surgió a través de la empatía hacia las luchas raciales (95,6 %), la motivación para resistir la injusticia (70,8 %) y los sentimientos de solidaridad intercultural (92,4 %). Los datos cualitativos muestran que los lectores relacionan las narrativas raciales con las desigualdades en Indonesia, utilizan la cultura local para interpretar el poder, critican el dominio occidental y conectan los problemas raciales globales con sus propias realidades sociales.

Conclusiones: los lectores indonesios utilizan la literatura afroamericana para desarrollar empatía, alfabetización crítica y conciencia poscolonial, contribuyendo a la comprensión intercultural.

Palabras clave: Recepción Literaria; Poscolonialismo; Literatura Afroamericana; Conciencia Transnacional.

INTRODUCTION

Reading racial narratives across borders has become an important part of global literary engagement. African American literature, in particular, offers powerful portrayals of racial inequality, cultural identity, and historical trauma.⁽¹⁾ For readers outside the United States, these texts open a space to encounter experiences shaped by oppression and resistance, inviting reflection on broader questions of humanity, justice, and collective memory. In Indonesia, where society has been shaped by colonialism and ethnic diversity, such reading experiences can generate meaningful cross-cultural resonance.

Although discussions about race have become more global, research rarely explains how readers in non-Western contexts interpret racial narratives from literary traditions they have not directly experienced.⁽²⁾ Much of the existing scholarship focuses on African American readers or Western academic communities, leaving a gap in understanding how meaning is negotiated by readers in Southeast Asia who share different historical, social, and cultural backgrounds.^(2,3) It means that current knowledge about cross-cultural literary reception is still narrow and does not represent the diversity of global readers. It implies that perspectives from regions like Indonesia are essential to broaden the academic understanding of how racial narratives travel and are reinterpreted across borders.

Indonesia's long colonial history and internal ethnic dynamics shape the way readers approach themes of inequality and power, yet little research investigates how these conditions influence their interpretation of African American literature. The potential connections or tensions between Indonesia's own postcolonial sensitivities and the racial struggles depicted in African American texts remain underexplored.⁽⁴⁾ It means that Indonesian readers may bring unique interpretive filters that differ from Western readings. It implies that their engagement with African American literature could reveal new forms of empathy, critique, or identification that have not been adequately documented in existing scholarship.

Previous studies on cross-cultural reading often rely either on postcolonial analysis or on reader-response theory, but rarely combine both. Research shows that readers from the Global South may reinterpret literary works through their local experiences and cultural identities.^(5,6) Studies of African American literature also highlight its relevance for understanding internal colonization, systemic racism, and historical trauma.^(7,8) However, few investigations examine how readers from postcolonial nations actively negotiate meaning, challenge dominant narratives, or develop empathy through transnational reading. It means that the theoretical conversation between postcolonial studies and reception theory has not been sufficiently developed.^(9,10) It implies that integrating both perspectives can offer a more complete understanding of how readers construct, transform, or resist meanings when engaging with racial narratives from different cultural origins.

To address these research gaps, the present study examines patterns of reader reception using Robert Jauss's reception theory together with the postcolonial perspectives of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha. These frameworks enable a systematic analysis of how Indonesian readers construct meanings related to race, identity, and power when engaging with African American literature. It means that the research explores not only whether readers show interest in these texts, but also how they interpret themes such as racial inequality, cultural identity, and resilience, patterns that later emerge strongly in the quantitative findings.

RELATED STUDY OF READING RACE ACROSS BORDERS: INDONESIAN RECEPTION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE IN A POSTCOLONIAL FRAME

Postcolonial Reading

Postcolonial reading is grounded in the idea that literary texts are shaped by histories of power, domination, and cultural negotiation. Scholars such as Bourdeau⁽¹¹⁾ emphasize that postcolonial criticism is not limited to uncovering colonial residues in the literature of formerly colonized societies, but also challenges Western-centered discourses that have long shaped meaning and representation. Literature functions as a space where marginalized voices speak back and where dominant narratives can be questioned. This aligns with the view that reading is never neutral; it is an act shaped by identity, political awareness, and cultural memory.

Recent developments extend this approach into new directions. Bhabha⁽¹²⁾ and Apter⁽¹³⁾ introduce green postcolonialism, which connects postcolonial critique with ecological issues, arguing that colonial exploitation affects both populations and the environment. Meanwhile, Davis⁽¹⁴⁾ and Coates⁽¹⁵⁾ highlight diaspora and migration as crucial lenses, noting that displacement and cultural hybridity redefine how identity is formed in global contexts. Durrant⁽¹⁰⁾ stresses the need for contextual reading, suggesting that interpretation varies across sociocultural environments—an idea relevant when texts such as African American literature are read in Indonesia. More recent transcultural perspectives⁽¹⁶⁾ illustrate that postcolonial reading now addresses relationships among communities and global networks of memory and mobility rather than focusing solely on colonizer-colonized binaries.

Overall, studies show that postcolonial reading has evolved into an interdisciplinary approach capable of addressing issues of identity, ecology, and globalization. It provides a framework for understanding how readers negotiate meaning across borders and why cross-cultural encounters produce new interpretations and reflections on power.

Reader Reception in Literary Studies

Reader reception theory positions the reader as an active participant in meaning-making. Bhabha⁽¹²⁾ explains that readers bring their social background, cultural experiences, and personal histories into their reading, which shape the interpretive process. This shifts literary meaning from a fixed property of the text to a dynamic interaction between reader and narrative.

Damrosch⁽⁶⁾ deepens this argument by demonstrating how cultural contexts generate diverse responses to the same text. A literary work may speak differently to readers in distinct cultural settings, making interpretation fluid and locally grounded. Giles⁽¹⁷⁾ adds to this through the concept of interpretive communities, emphasizing that meaning is influenced by shared norms and collective understandings within social groups.

Reception studies have also moved into digital spaces. Huggan⁽¹⁸⁾ shows how online reading communities engage in participatory practices where readers discuss, rewrite, and reinterpret texts. In postcolonial contexts, Hoon⁽¹⁹⁾ notes that readers often perform resistant readings to challenge dominant Western ideologies embedded in literature. These developments signal that reader reception is crucial for understanding how Indonesian audiences relate African American literature to their own histories, social issues, and cultural imaginaries. Together, these perspectives highlight that reading is an interactive and socially situated process. They also show why Indonesian readers may produce interpretations that reflect both global racial narratives and local experiences of inequality and identity.

African American Literature and the Issue of Race

African American literature has long been recognized as a body of work that records histories of oppression, racial trauma, and resistance while also offering complex artistic and philosophical contributions. Higashida⁽²⁰⁾ emphasize the global dimensions of African American writing, noting that its themes resonate across national and cultural boundaries, particularly in contexts shaped by colonial histories and racial hierarchies.

Scholars such as Jenkins *et al.*⁽²¹⁾ underscore how the legacy of slavery continues to shape Black existence today, making texts by writers like Toni Morrison or Colson Whitehead relevant not only as historical narratives but also as reflections on ongoing structural violence. Whitehead's recent works, for instance, illustrate how speculative realism can expose systemic racism and connect past atrocities with contemporary realities.⁽²²⁾ Intersectionality adds another layer to this discourse. Harris⁽²³⁾ highlights the contributions of Black women writers who confront intertwined oppressions related to gender, race, and power. On a global level, Huggan *et al.*⁽²⁴⁾ position African American literature within the Black Atlantic, stressing its transnational character and its capacity to foster shared reflections on identity, memory, and justice across diasporic communities. These developments show that African American literature speaks to universal struggles related to domination, identity, and resilience. Its global circulation, now reaching readers in Indonesia, creates opportunities for reflection, empathy, and cross-cultural understanding.

Postcolonial Reading and African American Literature

In the past decade, the postcolonial approach has become central to understanding African American literature from a global perspective. Graham, Maryemma et al.⁽²⁵⁾ argue that although African American writing emerges from the internal structures of racism in the United States, it parallels classical postcolonial themes such as displacement, hybridity, and cultural negotiation. This reading positions African American experiences within broader global struggles against domination. Iser⁽²⁶⁾ and Bourdeau⁽¹¹⁾ strengthens this view by rejecting strict divisions between postcolonial theory and race studies, advocating for an intersectional mode of analysis that captures the complex entanglements between colonial histories and racialized structures in America.⁽²⁷⁾ For Huggan⁽²⁸⁾ the postcolonial lens also illuminates connections between African American movements and global decolonial struggles, reinforcing the idea that Black resistance has always been transnational.

Educational perspectives also recognize the value of this approach. Gunawan⁽²⁷⁾ suggests that teaching African American literature through a postcolonial lens can foster reflective cross-cultural discussions, allowing readers to connect their own sociohistorical contexts to global narratives of oppression and resistance. At the same time, critics such as Huggan caution against oversimplifying African American history, emphasizing its unique historical specificity. More recent frameworks, such as Mbembe's necropolitics,⁽²⁰⁾ broaden the analysis by examining how modern power structures determine whose lives are valued or neglected—issues central to readings of contemporary African American works.

Taken together, these studies show that postcolonial readings of African American literature have expanded into a multidimensional field. They reveal how race, identity, and global power relations intersect, offering a productive lens for interpreting African American texts in contexts such as Indonesia, where readers engage with these works through their own histories of inequality, cultural negotiation, and social reflection.

METHOD

Type, Period, and Location of Research

The research employed is an exploratory qualitative study supported by a reader-response approach within a postcolonial framework. The rationale behind this methodology is to gauge and analyze the responses of Indonesian readers to African-American literary texts that address issues of racism. The research process, incorporating the distribution of questionnaires, interviews, and data processing, was conducted over a period of six months, from February to July 2025. The research center is located in the English Literature Study Program at Universitas Negeri Padang.

Population and Sample

The population for the study consists of English Literature students from 10 universities across five islands in Indonesia: Sumatra, Java, Bali, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan. From this population, 250 readers were selected on the basis of their prior academic experience, which included courses in American Literature, the History of English and American Literature, or Cross-Cultural Understanding. The study employed purposive sampling to ensure that the respondents possessed the relevant background. The inclusion criterion was readers who had taken a course related to American Literature or similar subjects. The exclusion criterion was respondents who had not taken a course related to American Literature, or who had studied it but failed. The study also provides exit criteria for respondents who withdraw or do not complete the questionnaire.

Analysis Variables

The present study analyses four variables, namely: The following topics will be examined in this study: the interest of Indonesian readers in African-American literature; the reception of African-American literature by Indonesian readers from a postcolonial perspective; the factors that influence the reception of African-American literature by Indonesian readers; and the adaptation of contextual meaning by Indonesian readers. The analysis of these variables was conducted utilizing NVivo, a software not frequently employed in literary reception research, particularly in the context of reading reception studies informed by a postcolonial perspective. This technique enabled Indonesian readers to comprehend the concept of cross-cultural racism in African-American literature.⁽¹²⁾

Research Instruments

The instruments utilized in this study were a questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The questionnaire was utilized to collate data on readers' responses, whereas the interviews were employed to gather data on the in-depth meaning and readers' experiences regarding the issue of racism in African-American literature. The validation of both instruments was conducted by expert validators in their respective fields, namely lecturers in literature and experts in American studies.

Data Collection

The data collection process was initiated with the selection of respondents through the implementation of inclusion and exclusion criteria. The respondents then completed a questionnaire, which had been distributed via Google Forms. The subsequent phase of the study involved the conduction of in-depth interviews, which were conducted in person for respondents from Sumatra and via Zoom for respondents from Java, Bali, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

The subsequent data analysis was conducted in accordance with the thematic analysis procedure,⁽²⁸⁾ which encompasses six distinct stages: The data were familiarized with through repeated reading. Initial thematic coding was then conducted inductively and deductively, with a focus on emotions, interpretations, and postcolonial parallels. The codes were then categorized into larger thematic groups. The themes were then reviewed and refined. Finally, the findings were interpreted through a framework of postcolonial theory and transcultural empathy. The data were triangulated from the questionnaire, interviews, and NVivo coding results.

Ethical Considerations

The present study was conducted in accordance with the principles of research ethics. The respondents were requested to participate voluntarily and without coercion. Furthermore, students were permitted to withdraw without any repercussions for their degree or other considerations. Furthermore, respondents were kept anonymous. The procedures and steps of this research have also been approved by university's ethics committee.

RESULTS

Indonesian Readers' Interest in African-American Literature

At first, the findings show that Indonesian readers demonstrate a remarkably strong interest in African American literature, driven primarily by its thematic depth and emotional resonance. Quantitative data indicate that most respondents were attracted to themes of racial inequality and cultural identity (93,6 %), cultural representations of resilience (88,4 %), and emotionally engaging narratives (79,2 %). First, these preferences reveal that readers view African American literature not merely as a foreign cultural product but as a source of reflection on universal human struggles. Second, the desire to explore more works in this tradition (92,8 %) underscores the potential of African American literature to foster sustained cross-cultural engagement. Finally, qualitative responses confirm that readers appreciate the diversity embedded in African American narratives (85,6 %), which they see as enriching their understanding of global cultures while simultaneously engaging their own emotional and moral imagination.

Indonesian Readers' Reception from a Postcolonial Perspective

First, the reception patterns suggest that Indonesian readers interpret African American literature through a postcolonial lens shaped by their own historical consciousness. Quantitative findings show that readers demonstrate high awareness of slavery and colonialism (88,4 %) and acknowledge their influence on identity formation (96,4 %). Second, readers also draw connections between the legacy of American racial oppression and Indonesia's own experiences with colonial power and social hierarchies, illustrated by their recognition of ongoing structural racism (89,6 %) and support for literature as a form of resistance (84,4 %). Additionally, qualitative narratives reveal that readers often critique Western dominance and identify parallels between African American resistance and Indonesian narratives of cultural resilience. Finally, this postcolonial mode of reading is further reinforced by readers' support for non-Western perspectives (80,4 %), indicating that Indonesian audiences approach African American literature not as passive observers but as critical participants who situate the texts within broader global power dynamics.

Factors Influencing Indonesian Readers' Reception

At first, Indonesian readers' receptions are shaped by a combination of emotional, cultural, and socio-historical factors that influence how they construct meaning from African American literature. Quantitative data show that empathy for racial struggles is strong (95,6 %), which forms an initial emotional framework guiding interpretation. Second, motivation to resist injustice (70,8 %) and a sense of cross-cultural solidarity (92,4 %) indicate that many readers map the struggles depicted in the texts onto their own social realities. Qualitative findings further show that readers frequently draw on Indonesia's ethnic, religious, and class-based inequalities to make sense of racial narratives from the African American experience. Additionally, local cultural values such as communal identity, respect for elders, and the memory of colonial-era resistance serve as interpretive anchors helping readers assess power relations and identity conflicts. Finally, these combined factors demonstrate that Indonesian readers' interpretations are neither abstract nor detached but closely tied

to personal, cultural, and historical experiences.

Indonesian Readers' Contextual Adaptation of Meaning

First, Indonesian readers adapt the meanings of African American literature by contextualizing racial narratives within their own socio-cultural environment. Qualitative evidence shows that readers often reinterpret themes of oppression, mobility, and identity through Indonesia's struggles with inequality, marginalization, and religious or ethnic tension. Second, this process generates a form of transnational awareness, supported by quantitative findings showing high levels of empathy (95,6 %) and feelings of cross-cultural solidarity (92,4 %). Readers use these emotional responses as a bridge to translate distant racial histories into reflections on their daily encounters with power, discrimination, and social stratification. Additionally, readers frequently draw parallels between African American resistance movements and Indonesian experiences of reclaiming agency after colonial rule, demonstrating that literary meaning becomes locally relevant through reinterpretation. Finally, these findings imply that Indonesian readers are active cultural intermediaries who reshape global racial narratives into insights that speak directly to Indonesian society's ongoing negotiation of identity, justice, and collective memory.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that Indonesian readers engage African American literature with a level of interest that is both affective and intellectual.^(29,30,31) Their strong attraction to themes of racial inequality (93,6 %), cultural identity (93,6 %), and resilience (88,4 %) suggests that these narratives speak to concerns that extend beyond their original sociocultural setting. This indicates that the appeal of African American literature does not depend solely on its historical specificity but on its capacity to evoke universal reflections on oppression, identity formation, and survival. The high desire to read more works in the genre (92,8 %) further confirms that Indonesian readers view these narratives not as distant cultural artifacts but as meaningful texts with continued relevance to contemporary social life.

From a postcolonial perspective, Indonesian readers' interpretations demonstrate a clear tendency to position African American narratives within broader histories of colonialism and inequality. Their strong recognition of slavery and colonialism (88,4 %) and their understanding of its role in shaping identity (96,4 %) reflect an interpretive mode grounded in lived postcolonial consciousness. This pattern aligns with Jauss's view that reading is historically located and with Said's argument that colonial legacies continue to shape interpretive frameworks. Readers do not encounter texts such as *Beloved* or *The Bluest Eye* simply as accounts of American racial trauma; instead, they interpret them as resonant with Indonesia's own experiences of structural hierarchy, marginalization, and cultural negotiation. Such responses reinforce Spivak's notion of the subaltern reader who interprets literature through an awareness of overlapping global and local power structures.

The reception patterns also reveal that Indonesian readers construct meaning through an active process of contextual adaptation. Interview data show that readers frequently relate African American struggles to Indonesian issues of ethnic, religious, gendered, and class-based discrimination. This supports Iser's concept of appropriative reading, in which meaning emerges through the interaction between textual cues and the reader's socio-cultural environment. For instance, connections drawn between Black segregation and discrimination against local minority groups demonstrate how Indonesian readers reinterpret racial narratives through familiar social frameworks. These interpretive bridges are further strengthened by high levels of empathy (95,6 %) and cross-cultural solidarity (92,4 %) reported in the quantitative data, suggesting that emotional identification plays a central role in shaping how readers negotiate meaning.

Another important dimension of the findings is the readers' critique of Western narrative dominance. Their support for non-Western perspectives (80,4 %) and recognition of literature as a site of resistance (84,4 %) indicate that Indonesian readers are not merely engaging with African American literature as consumers of American culture. Instead, they position themselves within a broader movement of decolonizing reading practices. This involves questioning the canon, challenging the authority of Western-centered narratives, and acknowledging the value of stories that emerge from the Global South. In this way, Indonesian readers' responses reflect Bhabha's idea of the "third space," where hybrid and alternative meanings can emerge through intercultural encounters.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that the reading of African American literature in Indonesia functions as a socially grounded cultural practice. It is not limited to aesthetic appreciation; it involves historical reflection, identity negotiation, and the cultivation of critical literacy. Readers use the texts to revisit Indonesia's own colonial inheritance, to critique existing social inequalities, and to strengthen their sense of global ethical responsibility. This transnational mode of reception shows that literature can create shared interpretive spaces that connect geographically distant communities through parallel experiences of struggle and aspiration. Ultimately, Indonesian readers' engagement with African American literature illustrates how literary works can

travel across contexts and become catalysts for empathy, critical awareness, and postcolonial consciousness.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that Indonesian readers engage African American literature with both strong interest and meaningful interpretive depth. Their attraction to themes of racial inequality, cultural identity, resilience, and structural injustice reflects not only curiosity about a different cultural world but also a recognition that these narratives speak to concerns familiar within their own society.^(8,23) Readers do not approach the texts as distant cultural products; instead, they relate them to local histories of colonialism, inequality, and identity negotiation, demonstrating that cross-cultural literary engagement is shaped by shared human experiences and parallel social conditions.

The findings also indicate that readers interpret African American literature through a postcolonial lens that encourages critical reflection on power, representation, and historical memory. They question the dominance of Western narratives, evaluate how identities are constructed within the texts, and reposition themselves as active participants in meaning-making.^(3,8) Through this process, Indonesian readers not only receive but also reshape the texts, grounding them in their own social realities and demonstrating the dynamic nature of reader-text interaction across cultural boundaries.

Furthermore, the study highlights how readers draw connections between the racial struggles depicted in the literature and the forms of discrimination they observe in Indonesia, whether related to ethnicity, religion, gender, or social class. These interpretive links illustrate that reading becomes a dialogic process where emotional engagement, personal experience, and social awareness intersect.^(13,26) Literature thus becomes a space for reflection, empathy, and critical consciousness rather than mere aesthetic enjoyment. The overall pattern of reception shows that Indonesian readers treat African American literature as a source of insight and as an avenue for imagining more inclusive and equitable social relations. Their responses reveal a desire to acknowledge alternative perspectives, support marginalized voices, and challenge dominant global discourses. In this way, reading emerges as a subtle but meaningful form of cultural and intellectual resistance.^(6,19)

In conclusion, African American literature resonates deeply with Indonesian readers because it offers narratives that cross borders of history, geography, and identity. It functions as a medium for building solidarity, expanding cultural understanding, and strengthening critical literacy in a world still shaped by systems of inequality. This study affirms the value of cross-cultural literary encounters and underscores the role of readers as active agents in interpreting, transforming, and sustaining literature's relevance across contexts.

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