

# MACHIAVELLANISM IN EKA KURNIAWAN'S NOVEL *LELAKI HARIMAU*

**Trisya Sonya, Wan Anayati, Devi Pratiwy**  
Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia  
E-mail: wnnt70@gmail.com

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## Abstract

This research examines Machiavellianism in Eka Kurniawan's novel *Lelaki Harimau* (Man Tiger), investigating how characters navigate power dynamics and ethical dilemmas in rural Indonesia. Drawing on Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), the study analyzes how characters employ cunning, manipulation, and strategic thinking to achieve personal goals. Utilizing textual, thematic, and interpretative analysis, the study dissects the novel's narrative structure, character development, and thematic concerns related to Machiavellianism. Key passages reveal that characters, notably Margio, exemplify Machiavellian traits through concealing intentions, manipulating perceptions, and rationalizing morally ambiguous actions. The novel portrays a complex interplay of power dynamics, personal ambition, and cultural influences, shedding light on human capacity for deception and pursuit of power. This research deepens understanding of Machiavellianism in Southeast Asian literature, illuminating its role in exploring universal themes of power, morality, and human nature within an Indonesian context. By contextualizing Machiavellian behavior, the study enriches discussions on literature's reflection of societal norms and ethical dilemmas, offering a nuanced perspective on Kurniawan's portrayal of complex moral landscapes in contemporary fiction.

**Keywords:** *dark triad; narcissism; psychopathy*

## 1. Introduction

Machiavellianism, rooted in the political theories of Niccolò Machiavelli, particularly as articulated in his seminal work *The Prince* (1532), encapsulates a pragmatic and often amoral approach to the acquisition and maintenance of power. This philosophy advocates for the use of cunning, manipulation, and realpolitik as strategies to navigate political landscapes and assert authority (Machiavelli, 2008). Over the years, the term has transcended its original political context, becoming a crucial analytical lens within literature, politics, and psychology to dissect the complexities of human behavior and the motivations of individuals in power (Christie & Geis, 1970). Machiavellianism's relevance in literary studies, particularly, has been underscored by various scholars who argue that it serves as a tool for exploring the ethical and moral dilemmas faced by characters, ultimately reflecting societal values and conflicts (McGuire, 2015; Mehta, 2018).

Eka Kurniawan's novel *Lelaki Harimau* (translated as *Man Tiger*) emerges as a compelling text for examining Machiavellianism within a contemporary Southeast Asian context. Set against the backdrop of a small Indonesian village, the narrative centers on Margio, a young man possessed by a supernatural white tiger—a manifestation of ancestral heritage that imbues him with both power and turmoil. Kurniawan intricately weaves themes of violence, revenge, and the supernatural, crafting a narrative that invites an analysis of the dynamics of power and ethical considerations inherent in the characters' lives. As Kurniawan presents this blend of folklore and modernity, the text becomes a rich site for examining how Machiavellian principles operate within the fabric of rural Indonesian society.

The application of Machiavellian principles to *Lelaki Harimau* allows for an intriguing exploration of the characters' motivations and actions. Margio's internal conflicts and his interactions with his community reveal the multifaceted nature of power and its often ambiguous moral implications. This analysis not only illuminates Kurniawan's narrative strategies and thematic concerns but also enriches the discourse surrounding power, ethics, and identity in literature (Dahl, 2019). Previous studies have emphasized the significance of Machiavellianism in literary analysis, arguing that such traits can expose the underlying social and psychological tensions that shape human interactions (McGuire, 2015; Mehta, 2018). Furthermore, critics have noted that examining Machiavellianism in postcolonial literature can reveal the lingering effects of colonial power structures on contemporary societies, thus offering a nuanced understanding of how power dynamics are navigated in postcolonial contexts (Fanon, 1963; Ashcroft et al., 2007).

This research aims to extend these discussions within the framework of Indonesian literature, investigating how Kurniawan articulates the complexities of power, manipulation, and ethical ambiguity in *Lelaki Harimau*. Employing a combination of textual analysis and theoretical critique, the study dissects how characters manipulate their environments and relationships to fulfill their desires, the ethical dilemmas they confront, and the repercussions of their actions. Through this lens, the research elucidates Kurniawan's commentary on human nature and societal norms, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of his work within both Indonesian and global literary contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

Machiavellianism, as a concept, has garnered significant attention across various disciplines, including political science, psychology, and literature. Originating from Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), the term describes a political philosophy that endorses cunning, strategic manipulation, and a pragmatic approach to power (Machiavelli, 2008). In literature, Machiavellianism is often used to analyze characters and narratives that revolve around themes of power, control, and ethical ambiguity. This section reviews existing literature on Machiavellianism in literary studies, with a specific focus on its application to postcolonial and Southeast Asian literature, identifying gaps that this research aims to fill.

### 2.1 Machiavellianism in Literature

The study of Machiavellianism in literature has been extensive, with researchers exploring its presence in various cultural and historical contexts. Christie and Geis (1970) pioneered the psychological examination of Machiavellian traits, which has

since been adapted to literary analysis. Their work laid the foundation for understanding how literary characters exhibit manipulative and strategic behavior.

McGuire (2015) explored Machiavellian traits in modern literature, arguing that such characteristics reveal underlying social and psychological tensions. This study highlighted the relevance of Machiavellian analysis in uncovering the deeper motivations and conflicts within literary characters, providing a framework for understanding power dynamics in narrative texts.

Mehta (2018) extended the discussion to postcolonial literature, examining how Machiavellian strategies are employed by characters to navigate the residual effects of colonialism. This research revealed how postcolonial authors use Machiavellian traits to critique and reflect on the complexities of power in postcolonial societies. However, it primarily focused on African and Indian literature, leaving a gap in the exploration of Southeast Asian literary works.

## **2.2 Machiavellianism in Southeast Asian Literature**

While there is a substantial body of work on Machiavellianism in Western and postcolonial literature, its application to Southeast Asian literature, particularly Indonesian, remains underexplored. Indonesian literature, with its rich history and diverse cultural influences, offers a unique perspective on the themes of power and manipulation. Eka Kurniawan's *Lelaki Harimau* (Man Tiger), set in a small Indonesian village, provides an excellent case study for examining Machiavellianism in this context.

## **2.3 Gaps in Existing Research**

Previous studies have predominantly focused on Western literary texts or broader postcolonial contexts without delving into the specific cultural and social dynamics of Southeast Asia. Furthermore, there is a lack of research that combines Machiavellian analysis with the supernatural and mythological elements prevalent in Indonesian literature. Kurniawan's *Lelaki Harimau* integrates traditional folklore with contemporary issues, presenting a complex interplay of power, ethics, and cultural identity.

This research addresses the aforementioned gaps by applying Machiavellian analysis to a contemporary Indonesian novel, *Lelaki Harimau*. It explores how Kurniawan portrays the complexities of power, manipulation, and ethical ambiguity within a distinctly Indonesian setting. By examining the supernatural elements and their influence on the characters' actions and motivations, this study provides a nuanced understanding of Machiavellianism in a Southeast Asian context. In addition, this research integrates insights from psychology and legal studies, drawing on the author's background in these fields to offer a multidisciplinary perspective on the novel. This approach not only enriches the analysis but also contributes to a broader understanding of how literature can reflect and interrogate societal norms and ethical dilemmas.

## **3. Research Method**

This research utilized a qualitative approach to examine Machiavellianism in Eka Kurniawan's novel *Lelaki Harimau* (Man Tiger). Qualitative research is particularly suited for literary analysis as it allows for an in-depth exploration of themes, character motivations, and narrative structures (Creswell, 2013). The following

sections outline the specific methods employed in this study, including textual analysis, thematic analysis, and interpretative analysis, supported by relevant sources.

Textual analysis is a key method in literary studies, involving a close reading of the text to identify and interpret significant elements such as themes, symbols, and narrative techniques (Flick, 2014). For this research, textual analysis was used to explore how Machiavellian traits are depicted in the characters and plot of *Lelaki Harimau*. This method allowed for a detailed examination of the language, dialogue, and actions of the characters to uncover underlying Machiavellian strategies and behaviors.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyze recurring themes related to Machiavellianism in the novel. This method involves coding the text for patterns and themes, which are then categorized and interpreted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis focused on themes such as power, manipulation, ethical ambiguity, and the influence of supernatural elements on human behavior. By systematically identifying these themes, the study was able to draw connections between the characters' actions and broader Machiavellian concepts.

Interpretative analysis was used to provide a deeper understanding of the cultural and social context of the novel. This method involves interpreting the text within its historical, cultural, and social framework to uncover the broader implications of the narrative (Geertz, 1973). In the context of *Lelaki Harimau*, interpretative analysis was crucial for understanding how Kurniawan's portrayal of Machiavellianism reflects Indonesian cultural norms, folklore, and contemporary societal issues. This approach also helped to elucidate the novel's commentary on power dynamics and ethical dilemmas within an Indonesian setting.

Data collection for this research involved selecting relevant passages from *Lelaki Harimau* that illustrate Machiavellian traits and themes. These passages were carefully analyzed using the methods outlined above. Notes and observations were systematically recorded, and key quotes were extracted to support the analysis. The collected data were then organized into categories corresponding to the identified themes and analyzed in relation to the research questions.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, triangulation was employed by combining insights from textual analysis, thematic analysis, and interpretative analysis. Triangulation involves using multiple methods or sources to cross-check data and interpretations (Patton, 1999). This approach helped to corroborate the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of Machiavellianism in the novel.

Ethical considerations in this research primarily involved ensuring the integrity and accuracy of the analysis. Proper attribution of quotes and ideas was maintained, and the interpretations were grounded in the text and supported by relevant literature. The research adhered to academic standards for ethical research practices as outlined by Flick (2014).

#### **4. Discussion**

Machiavellianism, a concept derived from the political theories of Niccolò Machiavelli, is often associated with manipulative, strategic, and pragmatic behaviors used to gain power and achieve one's goals, often with a disregard for morality. In literature, characters exhibiting Machiavellian traits typically manipulate others, conceal their true intentions, and display a calculated use of violence and deceit to achieve their ends. Eka Kurniawan's *Lelaki Harimau* (Man Tiger) provides fertile ground for

exploring these themes through its complex characters and morally ambiguous narrative.

“Right now, I’m afraid I’m really going to kill someone.” Some time before his disappearance, Agung Yuda had heard Margio say he intended to kill his father. He had confessed there was something inside him, and that he could kill without hesitation. Agung Yuda had never asked what this something was, because he thought that even without it a boar herder could easily kill anyone. But of course nobody who hadn’t been there would believe these words came from Margio. He was the sweetest and the most polite of his peers. (Eka Kurniawan, 2014: 25)

The excerpt above highlights several key aspects of Machiavellianism as demonstrated by the character Margio. This analysis focused on the themes of hidden intentions, the duality of character, and the justification of violence. Margio's statement, “Right now, I’m afraid I’m really going to kill someone,” coupled with his confession of harboring "something inside him" that allows him to kill without hesitation, illustrates a significant element of Machiavellianism: the concealment of true intentions. Despite outwardly appearing as "the sweetest and the most polite" among his peers, Margio harbors dark and violent thoughts. This duality suggests a deeply hidden inner conflict, where his outward demeanor serves as a mask for his true capabilities and intentions. This aligns with Machiavellian principles where individuals often disguise their true motives to gain trust and manipulate those around them. Margio's ability to project a polite and sweet exterior while contemplating murder underscores the theme of duality, a common trait in Machiavellian characters. This duality enables him to navigate social interactions without raising suspicion, allowing him to maintain a strategic advantage over others. Agung Yuda’s disbelief that such words could come from Margio emphasizes the success of Margio’s facade, highlighting the deceptive nature integral to Machiavellianism. This duality is critical in understanding how characters can maintain social harmony while plotting disruptive actions beneath the surface. The notion that Margio "could kill without hesitation" suggests a rationalization and acceptance of violence as a means to an end, another hallmark of Machiavellianism. Margio's internal justification for his potential actions, driven by whatever "something" he feels inside, indicates a calculated approach to dealing with his father. This acceptance and rationalization of extreme measures for perceived necessary outcomes are reflective of Machiavellian strategies, where moral considerations are often secondary to achieving one's goals. Through the character of Margio in *Lelaki Harimau*, Eka Kurniawan explores themes central to Machiavellianism such as hidden intentions, duality of character, and the justification of violence. Margio's ability to mask his true nature and rationalize extreme actions demonstrates the complex interplay between outward appearance and internal motives, a core element of Machiavellian behavior. This analysis not only underscores Margio's Machiavellian traits but also reflects broader themes within the novel, contributing to a deeper understanding of the characters' psychological and moral landscapes. By examining these traits, the research aims to shed light on the intricate portrayal of Machiavellianism in contemporary Indonesian literature.

Machiavellianism in literature often examines how characters utilize cunning, deceit, and strategic manipulation to achieve their goals, frequently operating under a

vener of normalcy or morality. In Eka Kurniawan's *Lelaki Harimau* (Man Tiger), the character Margio embodies these traits, presenting a complex interplay between his public persona and his private intentions. This analysis will explore how Margio's actions and thoughts reflect Machiavellian themes, particularly through his contemplation of violence and manipulation.

Even if he had been serious about killing his father, the opportunity had passed. Komar bin Syueb was six feet under. The odds of him coming back to life were slim, about on a par with the chances of Margio making an enemy, and so there wasn't a potential victim in sight. While some of his friends got into fights, he wouldn't lay a finger on anyone. (Eka Kurniawan, 2014: 25)

The passage above provides further insight into Margio's Machiavellian characteristics, specifically his strategic thinking, self-control, and manipulation of appearances. Margio's recognition that the opportunity to kill his father "had passed" and his subsequent inaction highlight his strategic thinking. Unlike impulsive characters, Margio displays a calculated restraint, understanding that there is no longer a "potential victim in sight." This pragmatic approach aligns with Machiavellian principles where actions are carefully considered based on opportunity and feasibility, rather than being driven by immediate emotions. Margio's restraint from engaging in fights, in contrast to some of his friends, underscores his self-control and awareness of public perception. By not "lay[ing] a finger on anyone," Margio maintains a facade of peacefulness and respectability, which helps to conceal his true potential for violence. This self-control is a key Machiavellian trait, allowing him to navigate social environments without drawing unwanted attention or suspicion to his darker inclinations. The comparison between the improbability of Komar bin Syueb coming back to life and the unlikelihood of Margio making an enemy illustrates how Margio manipulates appearances to his advantage. His ability to avoid conflict and maintain a benign exterior, while internally harboring violent thoughts, exemplifies Machiavellian manipulation. By managing how others perceive him, Margio ensures that his true nature remains hidden, thereby protecting his strategic interests and maintaining his social standing.

In *Lelaki Harimau*, Eka Kurniawan presents Margio as a character embodying Machiavellian traits through his strategic thinking, calculated restraint, and manipulation of appearances. Margio's awareness of the timing and feasibility of violent actions, coupled with his ability to control his impulses and project a peaceful demeanor, highlights his complex and pragmatic approach to achieving his goals. This analysis of Margio's behavior not only underscores the novel's exploration of Machiavellian themes but also enriches the understanding of character motivations and the moral ambiguities within the narrative. By examining these aspects, the research aims to illuminate the intricate portrayal of Machiavellianism in contemporary Indonesian literature.

In examining Machiavellianism in Eka Kurniawan's *Lelaki Harimau*, it is crucial to explore how characters manipulate their emotions and actions to achieve personal goals, while often masking their true intentions. The character Margio exemplifies these traits, particularly in his complex reactions to his father's death and his interactions with others. This analysis will focus on Margio's behavior and its alignment with Machiavellian principles, as observed through his interactions with Agung Yuda.

Agung Yuda was one of those who witnessed how exceedingly happy the young man was when he came home to find his father dead. He thought that with Komar bin Syueb's death all the problems in the household would end. Now he realized that was nonsense. Agung Yuda thought Margio was feeling down, and all his rambling about a shameful idea and killing somebody was rubbish. Margio simply said what he did because he couldn't think of anything better to say. (Eka Kurniawan, 2014: 28)

This passage provides deeper insight into Margio's Machiavellian characteristics, particularly his manipulation of emotions, strategic use of speech, and the disparity between his public persona and private intentions. Margio's "exceeding happiness" upon discovering his father's death is a stark contrast to typical social expectations, revealing a Machiavellian manipulation of emotions. His reaction suggests a sense of liberation rather than mourning, which aligns with Machiavellian traits of prioritizing personal relief and strategic advantage over conventional morality. This manipulation extends to how he conceals his true feelings from others, maintaining a facade that serves his interests. Agung Yuda's observations that Margio's "rambling about a shameful idea and killing somebody was rubbish" and that he "simply said what he did because he couldn't think of anything better to say" highlight Margio's strategic use of speech. Margio's ability to deflect and downplay his earlier violent thoughts reflects Machiavellian tactics of using speech to confuse or mislead others. By trivializing his previous statements, Margio manages to maintain his benign image while obscuring his true intentions. The dichotomy between Margio's outward behavior and his internal state is a critical Machiavellian trait. Agung Yuda initially interprets Margio's happiness as a sign of relief from household problems, but later realizes this was an oversimplification. Margio's ability to present a socially acceptable exterior while harboring darker thoughts and motivations underscores his Machiavellian complexity. This duality allows him to navigate his social environment effectively, ensuring that his true motives remain hidden from those around him.

Eka Kurniawan's *Lelaki Harimau* portrays Margio as a character deeply entrenched in Machiavellian behavior. Through the manipulation of emotions, strategic use of speech, and maintaining a disparity between his public persona and private intentions, Margio exemplifies Machiavellian principles. His actions and reactions, especially in the context of his father's death, reveal a calculated approach to managing his social environment and achieving his personal goals. This analysis of Margio's behavior not only illuminates the novel's exploration of Machiavellian themes but also enhances the understanding of character complexity and moral ambiguity within the narrative. By focusing on these aspects, the research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on Machiavellianism in contemporary literature.

In analyzing Machiavellianism in Eka Kurniawan's *Lelaki Harimau*, it is important to scrutinize how characters strategically plan and execute their actions to achieve their goals while maintaining an outward appearance that deceives others. This approach involves examining the subtleties of their behavior, particularly in moments of tension and conflict. Margio's actions in this passage illustrate his Machiavellian traits, specifically his strategic positioning and the manipulation of perceptions.

But he stayed there, like a thief looking for an opening, feeling he might be watched in turn. The people at the soccer field saw him for

sure, but they knew Margio too well to be suspicious. No one gave a damn, and it seemed that Ma Soma wouldn't pop up again, as he was pumping well water to fill up the surau's tubs. The front door was now open, and it looked like Anwar Sadat was about to get some fresh air. Margio started to move. (Eka Kurniawan, 2014: 30)

This passage highlights Margio's Machiavellian characteristics through his careful planning, strategic positioning, and manipulation of others' perceptions. Margio's behavior is reminiscent of a "thief looking for an opening," indicating his careful planning and strategic positioning. This analogy suggests a high level of awareness and calculation, typical of Machiavellian tactics. Margio is patient and observant, waiting for the right moment to act, demonstrating his ability to strategize and execute his plans discreetly. Margio's understanding that "people at the soccer field saw him for sure, but they knew Margio too well to be suspicious" underscores his ability to manipulate perceptions. By maintaining a familiar and non-threatening demeanor, he ensures that others do not suspect his true intentions. This manipulation is a key Machiavellian trait, as it allows him to blend in and avoid drawing unwanted attention while pursuing his objectives. Margio's awareness of Ma Soma's actions and the front door's status further illustrates his Machiavellian nature. He notes that Ma Soma is occupied with pumping water and that Anwar Sadat is likely preoccupied with getting fresh air. This situational awareness enables Margio to exploit the moment, making his move when he is least likely to be noticed or interrupted. His ability to read and exploit the environment to his advantage reflects a deep understanding of strategic thinking and opportunism.

In Eka Kurniawan's *Lelaki Harimau*, Margio's actions in this passage exemplify key aspects of Machiavellian behavior. Through careful planning, strategic positioning, and the manipulation of others' perceptions, Margio navigates his environment with a calculated approach that minimizes suspicion and maximizes his chances of success. This analysis of Margio's behavior deepens our understanding of the novel's exploration of Machiavellian themes, highlighting the complexity and moral ambiguity of the characters. By focusing on these elements, the research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on Machiavellianism in contemporary literature, offering insights into the strategic and deceptive nature of human behavior.

## 5. Conclusion

In *Lelaki Harimau* (Man Tiger) by Eka Kurniawan, Margio emerges as a compelling embodiment of Machiavellianism, navigating the narrative with a blend of charisma and concealed motives. Margio's adeptness at masking his true intentions while manipulating his surroundings underscores his Machiavellian nature. His contemplation of violence and strategic restraint illustrate a character who prioritizes personal goals over moral constraints, echoing Machiavelli's pragmatic philosophy of ends justifying means. Kurniawan skillfully explores themes of deception and the duality of human character through Margio, revealing how individuals can simultaneously project innocence while harboring darker ambitions. This nuanced portrayal not only enriches our understanding of Margio but also invites deeper reflections on the complexities of human behavior and moral ambiguity within contemporary literature. By delving into Machiavellian themes, Kurniawan prompts readers to confront uncomfortable truths about power dynamics, manipulation, and the

ethical boundaries individuals may cross in pursuit of their desires. As such, Margio's portrayal in *Lelaki Harimau* serves as a poignant commentary on the intricacies of human nature and the enduring relevance of Machiavelli's insights in modern storytelling.

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