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# Interpersonal Relations among the East Timorese in Maria Matildis Banda's Novel Surat-Surat Dari Dili

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**Abstract:** Maria Matildis Banda's novel *Surat-Surat dari Dili* (Letters from Dili, 2005) explores one of the biggest crises experienced by Indonesia, namely East Timor's independence from Indonesia, as well as related issues (both before and after the occupation of the territory). This article seeks to explore the interpersonal relations and identities of the East Timorese in Maria Matildis Banda's novel *Surat-Surat dari Dili*. In doing so, it applies the network and plot analysis theories of Franco Moretti. Data collection was conducted through library research, while the dialectical and archaeological methods were used for data analysis. This study makes two findings. First, the people of East Timor (now Timor-Leste) generally have a fragmented identity, which may be attributed particularly to their experiences with Portuguese colonialism and the Indonesian occupation. Second, interpersonal relations in Timor-Leste are highly vulnerable to conflict, a fact influenced by the collective consciousness of local society. Although the majority of Timor-Leste's population are Catholics, and the religion teaches love as a fundamental tenet, interpersonal relations among the people of Timor-Leste tend to reflect the Portuguese belief that "Timor Nao Tem Amor" (the Timorese have no love). The novel *Surat-Surat dari Dili* shows that the people of Timor are a social product, with deep historical wounds that cannot be easily healed.

**Keywords:** interpersonal relations, trilogy of violence, collective consciousness, fragmented identity, colonialism, occupation, historical wound.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The issues of interpersonal relations and collective identity are complex and difficult to define (Leach, 1999). Giddens emphasises that true self-identity does not exist. It only exists theoretically, as in practice it is conditioned by one's situation in space and time. Identity is always created within a historical and biographical context (Strauss, 1995). However, for Klauss Eder (Eder, 2009), collective identity is a narrative construct that offers us the opportunity to identify the interactions and limits of interpersonal communications. Karen A. Cerulo writes that studies of identity should begin with "myself", including one's interpersonal interactions and sense of 'becoming myself' (Cerulo, 1997). One's attention may then shift from individual identity to collective identity. Human identity is determined by human beings' relations and communication networks with others. In their interactions with others, individuals' personal tendencies and choices are evidenced.

East Timor, which was part of the Unitary Republic of Indonesia from 1975 to 1999, has become an independent country called Timor-Leste. The path to independence was a long winding that leaves a legacy of deep suffering in the soul of this nation (McWilliam, 2011). Before being occupied by the Indonesian government, this small country was colonised by the Portuguese from 1702 to 1975. The withdrawal of Indonesian forces from Timor Leste was violent, including killings, property destruction, and displacement of large numbers of people. As a result, the half-island nation was destroyed severely under the protection of a peacekeeping force from various countries: the International Force for East Timor (*Interfet*). Through a bitter struggle against Indonesian occupation for 37 years, finally Timor Leste emerged as the first new nation of the twenty-first century.

Timor Leste is only a half-island country in the eastern Lesser Sunda Islands, at the southern extreme of the Indonesian Archipelago. It occupies the eastern half of the island of Timor, the small nearby islands of Atauro and Jaco, and the enclave of Ambeno, including the town of Pante Makasar, on the northwestern coast of Timor (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019). Dili is the capital and largest city. The country's experiences with colonisation, decolonisation, integration, and independence have been dramatic, and the occupation of East Timor continually produced conflict and violence that have influenced the shaping of the Timorese identity (Nalenan, 2020).

Since independence, as stating by Dal Poz, Since independence, Timor-Leste has faced serious socio-economic development problems (Dal Poz, 2018). Its economic policies must be reversed toward a broader and inclusive basis. They should focus more on human development and prioritize food security, education and health. Conflicts and violence among different groups might occur and erupt once again. Conflict and violence in Timor-Leste have a very long history. This affects their social relation and identity. In this article, the name East Timor—rather than Timor-Leste—is used to refer to human experiences during the integration phase.

Maria Matildis Banda, through her novel *Letters from Dili* (Banda M. M., 2005) portrays social damage that occurs in interpersonal relationships of people of Timor Leste. The novel tells of the love of two youths, Fernando and Isabel. Their romance offers them a starting point to unravel the intergenerational history of hatred and conflict between their families. It all began in 1946, when a feared tax collector named Norberto was publicly shamed, said to have embezzled tax money, and sentenced to exile in Angola.

Norberto's son, Benedito, sought the help of Manuel—the owner of a large plantation in Ermera—in his efforts to free Norberto. Manuel, who was falling in love with Norberto's daughter Natalin, decided to sell a parcel of his family's land to the parish to redeem his father and obtain a bride price for Natalin. This failed, however, when Francisco's family gave other land to the parish at no cost. Similar to Manuel, Francisco was the owner of a large coffee plantation in Ermera. This created a great enmity between the families of these plantation owners, which in turn led to such violent acts as threats, kidnapping, torture, rape, and murder.

Maria Matildis Banda is an Flores-born writer who has published many novels, including *Broken Sakura* *Liontin Sakura Patah* (Banda M. M., Liontin Sakura Patah, 2001), *Bugenvil Di Tengah Karang* (Banda M. M., Bugenvil di Tengah Karang, 2001), *Pada Taman Bahagia* (Banda M. M., Pada Taman Bahagia, 2021), *Rabies* (2002), *Doben* (Banda M. M., Doben, 2016), *Suara Samudra* (Banda M. M., Suara Samudra, 2017). Besides writer, Maria is also a lecturer who teaches at Udayana University, Denpasar, Bali.

Maria Matildis Banda's novel *Surat-Surat dari Dili* (2005) explores one of the biggest crises of Indonesian history—the independence of East Timor from the Unitary Republic of Indonesia—as well as related issues that occurred both before and after the occupation. Among the topics explored in the novel are the interpersonal relations and identity of the East Timorese.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHOD

This study seeks to explore the structure of East Timorese society through the structure of the novel. From a historical materialist perspective, it is the social situation that determines human consciousness rather than human consciousness that determines the social situation. According to Vandana Saxena's (Saxena, 2019/2020), the stories of the past of a colonized society forged on a root of violence are contested territory. Sharing stories and experiences will result in new relationships and social understanding to replace past relationships and traumatic legacies. Because human beings are determined by their social situation, studies of social history are important for understanding interpersonal relations and human identities.

The network and plot analysis theory of Franco Moretti (Moretti, 2021) urges literary scholars to examine the communication network structures and human interactions within novels. In social psychology, network theory refers to the use of group dynamics to determine the closeness or isolation of individuals within the group.

Using a classification model that is based on network theory, we can ascertain patterns of interpersonal interactions and communications. The model for character analysis introduced by Franco Moretti (2011) is called network and plot analysis theory, and may be completed using specific software. Moretti (Moretti, 2021) explains that network and plot analysis theory aims to study the interconnectivity of objects within a large group. The object being studied can be anything—banks, neurons, actors, research papers, friends...—and those objects are called nodes or vertices. The interconnections between objects are usually called edges. Analysis of how the vertices are connected by edges can reveal many unexpected features of large systems, the best known of which is the so-called 'small world' property, or 'six degree separation'; the uncanny rapidity with which one can reach any vertex in the network from any other vertex.

Studies using network theory seek to ascertain the intensity of interpersonal interactions and communications. We can determine, for example, the level of friendship established upon a basis of mutual trust. Unlike Moretti, whose study was highly quantitative in its measurement of the co-efficiency of interpersonal connections, this study qualitatively examines the intensity of interpersonal relations through meetings and communications. It does so by measuring the duration of conversations and interpersonal interactions based on the number of pages used to describe them, as well as the extent to which characters open themselves by revealing their personal lives. The assumption is that persons will more intensely communicate and interact with persons with whom they are already friendly and share interests.

The characters in this novel reveal unique tendencies in interpersonal relations and behaviours, particularly the prominent sense of suspicion. Such interpersonal relations need to be carefully examined and

explored, for through them one can obtain an in-depth understanding of the East Timorese identity through its historical formation. The characters and characterisations in *Surat-Surat dari Dili* cannot easily be classified through conventional means (as used for novels with linear and chronological plots). The classification of characters as main characters and secondary characters, as protagonists and antagonists, as round characters and flat characters, etc., is poorly suited to the novel *Surat-Surat dari Dili* and its characters. As such, the current article uses network theory as an alternative means of classifying characters.

In the study of literature, Wellek and Warren approach paradigm which strongly emphasizes the intrinsic analysis of literary works is still dominant (Wellek, 1948). Although new paradigms have emerged in literary approaches such as M. H. Abrams and Roland Tanaka (Taum, 2017), intrinsic studies are seen as the essence of literary analysis work. The emergence of *Network Theory*, *Plot Analysis* proposed by Franco Moretti (Moretti, 2021) further enriches the intrinsic study. In the new model proposed by Moretti, network and plot analysis, which is used in this study, aims to understand group dynamics to determine the relationship or isolation of a person in the group. By understanding this interpersonal communication system, this study can reveal the impact of social trauma experienced in East Timorese society, as revealed in the novel *Surat-Surat from Dili*. This study uses an intrinsic study method by utilizing a network model and plot analysis theory to reveal the relationship between the novel's structure and the structure of the society being studied.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 3.1 Structure of the Novel and Structure of Society

The narrative structure of *Surat-Surat dari Dili* cannot easily be understood through traditional categories of plot, setting, character, and characterisation. The time setting of this novel covers three periods of governance, from the Portuguese colonial period (1946–1975), through the transitional phase (1975–1976) and integration (1976–1998). The novel's plot does not begin with the root of the conflict in 1946 (which is only revealed in Chapter 5), but rather with the Santa Cruz massacre of 1991, during the integration phase. The plot then shifts to 1968, the peak of the legendary enmity between the plantation families of Manuel da Costa Sarmiento and Francisco Carvalho. Note the construction and reconstruction of the time setting as presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**  
**Construction and Reconstruction of Time**  
**in the Novel *Surat-Surat dari Dili***

Construction of Time	1991	1968	1968	1975	1946	1975	1975	1975-1976	1998
Chapter	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Reconstruction of Time	VIII	II	III	IV	I	V	VI	VII	IX

As seen in Table 1, the plot of *Surat-Surat dari Dili* is not a linear one. After various conflicts and issues are delineated in the first few chapters, the plot shifts again to 1975, a year that falls into the transitional period. The issues of the transitional phase, when East Timor had no government, are explored in Chapter 4. There were many conflicts and much friction between the people of East Timor at this time. It is during this period that political parties with diverse, and even opposite, aspirations and ideologies emerged. Significant suffering was experienced this phase. It was in 1975 that the characters Fernando and Isabela first met in the refugee camps. Only in the middle of the story does the author present the origins of the conflict between the families of Manuel and Francisco, namely the incident of 1946, which occurred during the Portuguese colonial period. The story then shifts again to 1975, 1976, and ends in 1998, the year before Timor-Leste gained its independence from Indonesia; this was the year when social conflict reached its peak.

Reconstructing the plot chronologically, the story begins from Chapter VIII (1991), then continues to Chapter II (1968), III (1968), IV (1975), and Chapter I (1946) the beginning of the cultural anxieties experienced by the characters. From Chapter I (1946), the story moves to Chapter V (1975), VI (1975), VII (1975–76), and ends with Chapter IX (1998), the final year of the Indonesian occupation. Much of the story (44.4%) takes place during the power vacuum that occurred during the transition from Portuguese rule to Indonesian rule, i.e. between 1975 and 1976 (44.4%). The Portuguese colonial era (1946, 1968, 1968) and Indonesian occupation (1976, 1991, 1998) each receive the same share, 33.3%. The focus on the transitional period is deliberate, as it has the potential to reveal the 'indigenous identity' of the East Timorese, without outside influences.

During the transitional period, the East Timorese did not have a clear and firm political stance. They were fragmented, with each group having different interests: some supported continued Portuguese governance, others desired independence, while still others wished to join Indonesia. Coalitions could easily dissolve, as

experienced by Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin) and the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT), both of which initially shared the same goal: Timor's independence (Banda, 2005: 144).

Each group was fighting for a goal. They were intimidating each other by spreading their wings wide. Terror was happening everywhere. People were suffering. Victims were falling after every clash as groups sought control of Dili, the centre of government. The power of the Portuguese became limited to the ports and the surrounding areas. Dili was in tatters, divided between different political groups<sup>1</sup> (Banda, 2005: 141).

Differences in political attitudes and choices brought further tragedies to families. "Brothers were shouting at each other, yelling at each other, hitting each other, wounding each other, and even killing each other, all with the same goal: a free life for every person in their beloved homeland"<sup>2</sup> (Banda, 2005: 187). Some fled to Timor's borders, mostly the area around Atambua. It is in one such refugee camp that Fernando and Isabel first met as children. The tragic circumstances of this meeting had a significant psychological effect on the children. Fernando became a doctor, having graduated from Udayana University in Bali, while Isabel became a teacher. Later, they met again and fell in love. Their romance was tested, however, by their family backgrounds.

This exploration of the plot structure and time setting of *Surat-Surat dari Dili* reflects the complicated social structure of East Timor, one which cannot be easily reconstructed or understood linearly. The people of East Timor seemingly exist within a spatial and chronological labyrinth, and as such the interpersonal relations and identities within society cannot be understood easily.

### 3.2 Nodes of Violence

Such a complicated narrative structure hinders readers in their understanding of the plot and the issues it presents. Such a complicated narrative structure is not found in Banda's other novels, such as *Bugenvil di Tengah Karang* (*Bougainvillea among Coral*, 1998), *Pada Taman Bahagia* (*In the Garden of Happiness*, 1997), *Liontin Sakura Patah* (*A Broken Cherry Blossom Pendant*, 1998), *Rabies* (2002), *Wijaya Kusuma dari Kamar Nomor Tiga* (*The Flowers of Victory from Room Three*, 2016), and *Suara Samudra* (*Voice of the Ocean*, 2017). This complicated narrative structure was deliberately used by the author to highlight the complexity of interpersonal relations and social tendencies in East Timor.

Interpersonal relationships among East Timorese also represent the same complex configuration. The long history of colonialism, conflict and violence experienced by its inhabitants, political intrigues, and struggle for power and access to very limited economic resources have had a major influence on the pattern of their human relations, including the most personal relationships. No institution is free from this bad influence, including church and marriage institutions. Relations between families tends to overshadowed by suspicion, resentment, and past traumas.

Figure 1 below attempts to show the relations, communications, and effects of interpersonal relations on the plot of the novel.

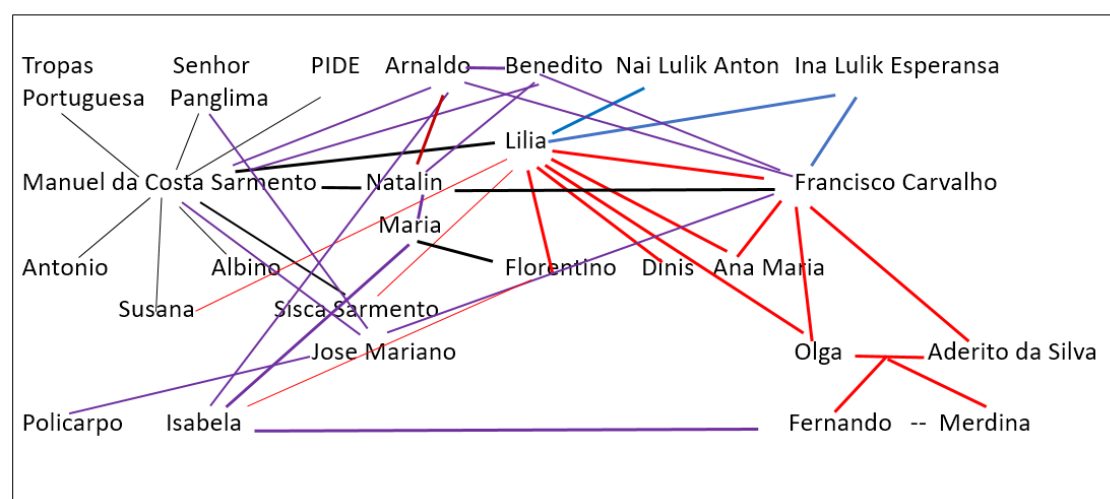
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<sup>1</sup> Original: Setiap kelompok berjuang mencapai tujuan. Mereka saling mengintimidasi dengan melebarkan sayap pengaruh. Teror terjadi di mana-mana. Rakyat menderita, korban berjatuhan setelah terjadi saling serang antarkelompok untuk memperebutkan Dili sebagai pusat pemerintahan. Kekuatan pasukan Portugis semakin menciut hanya di seputar pelabuhan. Kota Dili babak belur, terpecah-pecah ke dalam beberapa wilayah kekuasaan tiap-tiap kelompok politik

<sup>2</sup> Original: Sesama saudara saling berteriak, saling mencaci maki, saling menuding, saling menampar, bahkan saling membunuh dengan satu tujuan: kehidupan merdeka bagi orang-orang di tanah kesayangannya.

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**Figure 1**  
**Network and Plot Analysis Theory of First Letter, Dili 1991**

Applying the theory of Franco Moretti (Moretti, 2021), six nodes of power can be identified within East Timorese society, namely 1) Manuel da Costa Sarmiento, 2) Francisco Carvalho, 3) Lilia, 4) Jose Mariano, 5) Fernando, and 6) Isabela. Of these nodes, two major interest groups can be recognised in relation to the ownership of the coffee plantations in Ermera, namely: Manuel da Costa Sarmiento vis a vis Francisco Carvalho. The tragedy of their business relations, which affect the interpersonal relations between these families—including sexual violence, intergenerational vengeance—is exacerbated by the history of colonialism and decolonialism.

The business dealings of Manuel da Costa Sarmiento and Francisco Carvalho, as well as their families, involve two influential power structures. In the novel, Manuel's family is initially supported by the colonial Portuguese army (Tropas Portuguesa) and later by Senhor Panglima (during the Indonesian occupation). Meanwhile, the family of Francisco Carvalho is supported by the Catholic church, represented by a nun and pastor (Ina Lulik Esperansa and Nai Lulik Anton). From these nodes of power, one can recognise other sources of power that provide either support or opposition, as shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2**  
**Nodal Orientation of Power**

No	Node	Orientation of Power			
		Portuguese	Black Portuguese	Catholic Church	Indonesia
1	Manuel da Costa Sarmiento	✓	✓		✓
2	Francisco Carvalho			✓	

Table 2 shows that the node of Manuel da Costa Sarmiento interacted intensively and received fully support from the Portuguese colonialists, the black Portuguese group, and the Indonesian military officer who was called as Senhor Panglima. Meanwhile, the node of Francisco Carvalho only received support from the Catholic church.

The Portuguese, through their *tropas* (army) and feared secret police (PIDE, the *Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado*), always supported the node of Manuel da Costa Sarmiento. Even after Norberto the tax collector (the father of Natalin, the beloved of Manuel da Costa Sarmiento) was shamed and punished by the Portuguese for embezzlement, Manuel's family retained good relations with the colonial government.

The term "Black Portuguese" refers to East Timorese who were crueller in their attitudes and behaviours than the Portuguese themselves. These people were often low-level employees or followed the orders of the Portuguese. They often intimidated the general populace, or even committed acts of violence against them.

If the Black Portuguese had uniforms and titles, they would act even more Portuguese than the Portuguese themselves. They were the true colonial force. Bending low, they would lick the feet of the colonials, become

hands and feet that were always ready to harm their fellows. Francisco knew that. So many people ran to Church to seek the protection of *Nai Lulik* from the servants of the colonials<sup>3</sup> (Banda, 2005:150).

While East Timor was occupied by the Indonesian government, Senhor Panglima became the mysterious protector of Manuel's family. This character, whose true identity is never revealed in the novel— Senhor Panglima literally means "Mister Commander"—is said to have enjoyed enormous power, and to be capable of seizing plantation owners' assets.

The Catholic Church, the religious institution that represented the majority of East Timorese during the integration phase, held a limited spiritual power. Churches were full of mutually suspicious people (Banda, 2005: 186). Over time, even the pastors were no longer heeded.

Maybe he was no longer able to contribute anything to calm their hearts, those who could never be satisfied with injustice. Maybe his own position as a *Nai Lulik* left him unable to be heeded or obeyed. So many things were hidden behind the material walls of the church, and so many powers were at play within every aspect of the lives of the faithful<sup>4</sup> (Banda, 2005: 46).

The conflict and violence experienced by the people of East Timor was pervasive. As written by Johan Galtung (Galtung, 1980), there existed a 'triangle of violence' within East Timorese society: direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence. Direct violence, including its perpetrators and victims, could be witnessed directly, and was experienced intensely by both families, who attacked each other, raped each other, and killed each other. Structural violence, meanwhile, limits the fulfilment of humans' basic needs, but no single perpetrator can be held accountable. In the novel, the people of East Timor are shown as lacking legal certainty and human rights protection; at any time, the products of the Francisco family plantation can be seized by the da Costa family. Cultural violence, meanwhile, provides cultural legitimacy to direct and structural violence. It can be seen, for example, in the lack of cultural opposition to violence and abuse (Langkameng, 2020). The culture and customs of the East Timorese people, as well as the Catholic church, seemingly legitimise such acts in the novel.

### **3.3 Love: The Broken Bridges**

Tracing the history of hatred and vengeance between the families of Manuel and Francisco, one discovers the incident in 1946 when Noberto (Natalin's father) was publicly shamed by the Portuguese colonial government before being exiled to Angola. At the time, Manuel—who was falling in love with Natalin— attempted to collect enough money for Natalin's bride price by selling land to the Catholic Church; however, this failed as the Church had already received a donation of land from Francisco's family. This incident triggered the lengthy enmity between the two families.

At Manuel's provocation, Francisco was accused of rape and arrested; he died while imprisoned in Aipelo, Liquica. Meanwhile, Francisco's wife Lilia was by Manuel raped and gave birth to twins. These twins were killed by Manuel.

In the interactions and communications of these two families, which laid the foundation for the grudges and mutual desire for vengeance, numerous barbaric acts—including sexual violence and rape—could be found. Lilia (Francisco Carvalho's wife) was raped by Manuel Sarmiento, and nine months later she gave birth to twin girls named Susana Sarmiento and Sisca Sarmiento. Tragically, her two daughters were killed by their biological father. Seeking vengeance, Lilia killed Manuel Sarmiento. Later, Merdina (the daughter of Olga and Aderito) was raped by members of Manuel family. Meanwhile, Manuel arranged for Maria (the daughter of Natalin and Araujo) to be raped by Florentino (the son of Francisco and Lilia); in this incident, the main character Isabela Araujo was conceived.

Isabela Araujo (a member of Manuel da Costa's family) ultimately fell in love with Fernando da Silva (a member of Francisco Carvalho's family). Could the love of these characters bring together their feuding

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<sup>3</sup> Original: Jika Portugis hitam sudah berseragam dan berpangkat, tindakan mereka akan lebih Portugis dari Portugis. Merekalah penjajah sebenarnya. Sambil tertunduk dalam-dalam, mereka menjilat kaki penjajah, menjadi kaki tangan yang siap tendang pukul sesama saudaranya sendiri. Francisco menyadari hal itu. Begitu banyak umat yang lari ke Gereja untuk memohon perlindungan *Nai Lulik* dari antek-antek penjajah.

<sup>4</sup> Original: Mungkin dirinya tidak mampu membantu apa pun untuk mendedahkan rasa hati yang tak terpuaskan menghadapi ketidakadilan. Mungkin juga keberadaan dirinya sebagai seorang *Nai Lulik* tidak mampu lagi menjadi seorang yang dapat didengar dan dipatuhi. Betapa banyak masalah yang disembunyikan di balik pembangunan material dan berbagai kebijakan kekuasaan, dia rasakan hadir dalam keseharian hidup umatnya.



reconciliation and compromise made difficult by the legacy of antagonism dating back to the years of struggle (Latupeirissa, 2019).

The complex sentiments felt by East Timorese society provided fertile ground for the growth of conflict and violence that could undermine humanitarian values. Experience with conflict and violence closed their eyes and hearts to their historical journey as well as their traditional values. As David stated, unsuccessful resolution results in a "maladaptation," for instance in the form of fanaticism or a repudiation of adult responsibility (Kartini, 2020). As a result, the romance between Isabel and Fernando, who grew up tainted by a sense of mutual suspicion, could not have a happy ending. They were unable to recognise that they still had close familial ties. Conflict, violence, and vengeance had closed their hearts and eyes.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

We hardly find literary works presenting East Timor and its history of violence. Maria Matildis Banda's novel *Surat-Surat dari Dili* is a magnum opus of East Nusa Tenggara Literature. It explores part of the historical journey of East Timor. The success of the novel lies in its narrative, which allows it to represent the structure of East Timorese society. Historical experiences of violence, conflict, and pragmatic interests led the East Timorese to lose their feelings of love and friendship.

The novel must also be analysed in the light of the lessons of history, including the shift in the country's identity, in conjunction with the trauma of occupation. The effects of colonisation and decolonisation on the lives of the East Timorese were significant, both at the individual and the social level. Trust in others reached a nadir, and the Catholic Church (with its teachings of love) was unable to promote peace or a sense of kinship.

However, colonialism and de-colonialism were not the only causes for the breakdown of humanity and sense of kinship among its citizens. The scarcity of natural resources, differences in political orientation, diversity of local languages and cultures, and the presence of the Indonesian military also influence the pattern of their relations and life in general.

The complicated structure of the novel represents the equally complicated social structure of East Timor. Construction and reconstruction of the plot, setting, and characters of *Surat-Surat dari Dili* eases our understanding of the models of interpersonal relations, interactions, and communications contained within. The nodes of violence between two families in Ermera, East Timor, made use of the institutional powers in the region, i.e. the colonial government and the Catholic church. As such, these two institutions were unable to significantly promote peace and security in East Timor. Love was tainted by mutual suspicion and a desire for vengeance. Even at the personal level, love could not exist as a whole. Love and the union of two hearts, thus, cannot be found in the novel. Even love is also the broken bridges in East Timor. As such, the Portuguese saying that "*Timor Não Têm Amor*" (the Timorese have no love) seems justified. The deep historical wounds cannot easily be treated.

#### Conflict of interest

There is no conflict to disclose.

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