

The rhetoric of the image in the cover design of *Laut Bercerita*

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Abstract:

This study examines how the cover design of the 2017 softcover edition of Leila S. Chudori's *Laut Bercerita* represents the novel's narrative of political violence, loss, and collective memory. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study applies Roland Barthes's *Rhetoric of the Image*, with particular attention to the linguistic message, uncoded iconic message, coded iconic message, and anchorage. The primary data consist of the front cover and its dominant verbal and visual units, while the secondary data are drawn from design studies, semiotic studies, and studies on the novel's historical-fiction context. The findings indicate that the cover constructs a tightly integrated verbal-visual system in which the title and author line frame an underwater scene dominated by chained feet, fish, coral formations, and blue tonal fields. In the discussion, these elements are interpreted as a rhetoric of suppression and remembrance, through which the sea shifts from a decorative setting to a symbolic archive of disappearance and historical trauma. The study concludes that the cover functions not only as a marketing surface but also as a visual argument that condenses the novel's humanitarian and ideological concerns.

Introduction

Book covers serve as the first visual threshold between a literary work and its prospective readers. In visual communication design, a cover does not merely protect the printed object; it packages a theme, frames expectations, and mediates the reader's initial interpretation of the text that follows. For this reason, cover design is commonly discussed as both an aesthetic composition and a communicative surface capable of guiding reading interest and shaping meaning before the narrative itself is opened (Hasian, 2017; Idamayanti & Yusufhin, 2024; Imtiyaz et al., 2023).

In novel publishing, this representational role becomes even more important because typography, illustration, color, and layout work together to condense genre, tone, and ideological orientation. Previous studies on book covers have shown that visual packaging often functions as a narrative shortcut: a limited number of salient signs can suggest conflict, atmosphere, character position, or historical setting to the reader (Nofia & Bustam, 2022; Witari & Wardana, 2017; Zulkadinityas et al., 2026).

This perspective is highly relevant to *Laut Bercerita* by Leila S. Chudori. The novel is widely read as a work of historical fiction that revisits the violence surrounding Indonesia's 1998 reform era, especially the issues of forced disappearances, political repression, grief, and unfinished justice. Scholarly discussions of the novel repeatedly emphasize that its narrative force lies at the intersection of intimate loss and structural violence, where family memory, state terror, and collective mourning become entangled (Daud & Bagtayan, 2024; Hartati et al., 2024). As a work of historical fiction, it also relies on an imaginative reconstruction of a painful past while remaining anchored in recognizable historical tensions (Harvatt, 2023).

The 2017 softcover edition of *Laut Bercerita* is therefore a productive object of design analysis. Its front cover presents an underwater scene dominated by blue tonal fields, coral formations, small fish, and a pair of human feet bound by chains. At first glance, the cover appears lyrical and painterly, but the chained feet introduce a disturbing sign that disrupts the beauty of the marine setting. The title and author line are positioned below the image in a restrained typographic treatment, allowing the illustration to dominate the page while still directing the viewer toward a literary interpretation.

A number of previous studies are relevant to this problem. Research on book and cover design has highlighted how illustration, typography, and layout establish communicative focus in printed media (Budiarta et al., 2023; Hasian, 2017; Prasetyo et al., 2022; Witari & Wardana, 2017). More specifically, Nofia and Bustam (2022) use Barthesian semiotics to show how cover elements can construct narrative expectations through layered meaning. Zulkadinityas et al. (2026) demonstrate that changes in cover style across editions can preserve a novel's core visual meaning, while Prasetyo et al. (2022) show that illustration, typography, and layout jointly stabilize cover identity. From a related visual-media context, Muntazori et al. (2024) find that title and image play a dominant role in directing message reception, suggesting that verbal and visual signs rarely function independently in design artifacts.

However, previous studies on book covers have generally emphasized denotative and connotative meanings, formal visual comparison, or the identification of separate design elements. These approaches are valuable, but they tend to treat verbal and visual signs as individual units rather than as a coordinated rhetorical system operating on the same cover surface. This leaves an analytical gap concerning how a small verbal component, such as a title, can stabilize, redirect, and intensify the meaning of a dominant visual field.

Roland Barthes's essay "Rhetoric of the Image" is particularly suitable for addressing this gap because it does not only classify signs but also explains how verbal and visual messages interact. Its distinction among the linguistic message, uncoded iconic message, coded iconic message, and anchorage allows the cover of *Laut Bercerita* to be read as a structured visual argument rather than merely as a collection of symbolic elements. Through this framework, the analysis can show how typography, illustration, color, composition, and visual hierarchy work together to transform the sea, chained feet, fish, and coral formations into a rhetoric of disappearance, testimony, and historical memory.

The central argument of this article is that the 2017 softcover design of *Laut Bercerita* does not simply represent the novel's content through isolated signs. Instead, it constructs a visual rhetoric in which the title anchors the underwater image, the chained feet create a disruptive focal point, and the blue marine atmosphere turns the cover into a symbolic archive of political violence and unresolved memory. This argument clarifies the article's contribution to book-cover studies by foregrounding the relational mechanism between word and image in producing visual meaning.

Against this background, the study asks: how do the linguistic message, the uncoded iconic message, the coded iconic message, and the anchorage relation between text and image on the cover of *Laut Bercerita* represent the novel's content? The study aims to explain the cover as a rhetorical visual construction rather than as a merely decorative supplement to the novel. In doing so, the article contributes to discussions of book-cover design as a medium of historical memory and social critique in visual communication design.

Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method. This approach is appropriate because the object under investigation is semiotic rather than numerical: the study seeks to describe, classify, and interpret the meanings generated by a visual-verbal artifact. The theoretical framework is Roland

Barthes's 'Rhetoric of the Image,' which distinguishes three levels of message production in visual communication: the linguistic message, the uncoded iconic message, and the coded iconic message. The study also uses the concept of anchorage to explain how verbal text limits, directs, or stabilizes the interpretation of an image (Barthes, 1977; Chandler, 2007).

The object of analysis is the front cover of the 2017 softcover edition of *Laut Bercerita*, published by Gramedia Pustaka Utama. The analysis is limited to the front cover because it constitutes the book's most immediate public interface and the most concentrated site of visual rhetoric. The dominant units selected for analysis are the title, the author line, the underwater setting, the chained feet, the fish, the coral and rock formations, and the dominant blue color field. These units were selected based on four criteria: visual salience, compositional position, rhetorical relevance to the novel's theme, and their role in connecting verbal and visual meaning. The title and author line were retained because they are the only verbal units on the front cover and function as the main anchoring devices. The chained feet were selected because they form the most disruptive focal point in the illustration. The underwater setting, fish, coral-rock formations, and blue color field were retained because they organize the cover's spatial atmosphere and support the coded reading of depth, concealment, silence, and memory.

Primary data consist of the visual and verbal signs observable on the front cover. Secondary data consist of studies on semiotics, cover design, illustration, typography, and the novel's sociohistorical context. The secondary corpus was used not to replace the visual analysis but to provide contextual control, ensuring that the interpretations remained connected to design discourse and to previous scholarship on *Laut Bercerita* and related cover studies (Daud & Bagtayan, 2024; Hartati et al., 2024; Nofia & Bustam, 2022; Zulkadinityas et al., 2026).

The data were analyzed in four stages. First, the researcher identified the linguistic message by listing the verbal units present on the cover and examining their typographic placement, scale, and relation to the illustration. Second, the researcher described the uncoded iconic message by recording what is literally visible in the image without interpretation. Third, the coded iconic message was developed by relating the visible units to cultural meanings, historical trauma, and the novel's narrative horizon. Fourth, anchorage was examined by asking how the title and author line guide or narrow the reading of the illustration. Formal visual aspects, including composition, focal point, color dominance, typographic hierarchy, and the sequence of viewing, were also considered to ensure that the interpretation remained grounded in observable design features. The final step synthesized these findings to explain how the cover represents the novel's content as a design statement.

To strengthen trustworthiness, the study employed repeated close reading, source triangulation, and transparent unit selection. Repeated close reading was used to stabilize the inventory of salient signs, while source triangulation connected the cover image with scholarship on the novel and with prior design-semiotic studies. In addition, the annotated figure included in the Results section functions as an audit trail by making the observed units visible and traceable for readers. These procedures were intended to increase the dependability and confirmability of the interpretation.

Results and Discussion

Result

This section presents the descriptive findings generated from the cover corpus before extended interpretation. The corpus consists of one front-cover image from the 2017 softcover edition and one analytic mapping figure derived from the same object. Across repeated observations, seven units were retained because they were visually dominant or verbally indispensable: the title, the author line, the



underwater setting, the chained feet, the fish, the coral-rock framing, and the blue-dominant color field.



Figure 1. Front cover of Laut Bercerita, 2017 softcover edition
Source: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2017.

Figure 1 presents the front cover as the primary document, while Figure 2 marks the main units selected for analysis. Table 1 records the observable characteristics of each unit and its placement on the cover.

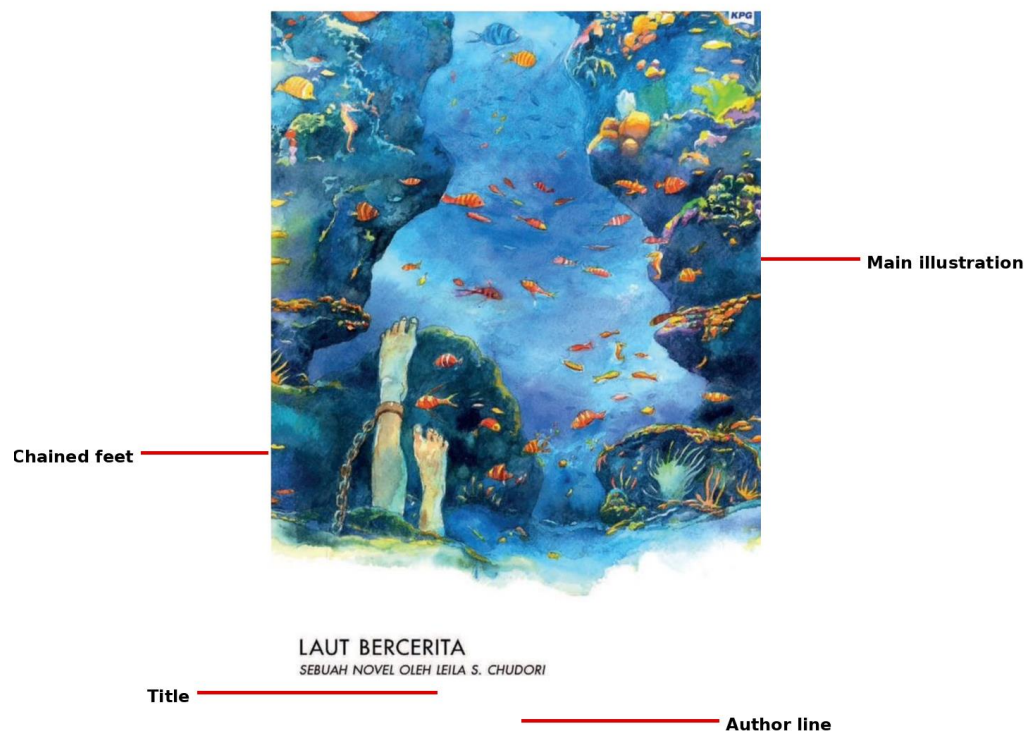


Figure 2. Salient verbal and visual units selected for analysis
Source: Annotated by the author based on the 2017 Gramedia edition.

Table 1. Descriptive inventory of verbal and visual units on the cover

Unit	Message type	Observable description	Position on cover
Title	Verbal	Uppercase sans-serif text reading "LAUT BERCERITA"	Lower-left textual zone beneath the illustration
Author line	Verbal	Smaller line reading "SEBUAH NOVEL OLEH LEILA S. CHUDORI"	Directly below the title
Underwater setting	Visual	Painterly underwater space with blue tonal gradation	Occupies most of the cover image
Chained feet	Visual	A pair of human feet, one bound by a chain, partly submerged and emerging from the seabed	Lower-left area within the image
Fish	Visual	Small orange and yellow fish distributed throughout the scene	Center and middle field of the illustration
Coral-rock framing	Visual	Rock and coral formations framing the left and right sides	Peripheral edges of the image
Blue color field	Visual	Dominant blue and blue-green tonal range	Across the entire illustration background

Source: Author's observation of the 2017 Gramedia softcover edition.

As shown in Table 1, the cover combines two verbal units and five dominant visual units. The verbal units are minimal in number, but their placement directly below the image makes them integral to the reading sequence. By contrast, the visual units dominate the page in scale and color, with the underwater setting functioning as the largest field and the chained feet serving as the most disruptive focal detail. To clarify how the interpretation was controlled and made traceable, Table 2 summarizes the procedures used to support validity and reliability in the analysis.

Table 2. Procedures used to support validity and reliability

Procedure	Application in this study	Function for trustworthiness
Repeated close reading	The same cover was observed repeatedly to stabilize the inventory of salient signs.	Improves consistency in unit selection.
Source triangulation	Visual observations were compared with scholarship on the novel and with prior semiotic and design studies.	Reduces purely impressionistic interpretation.
Category comparison	Each unit was checked against Barthes's categories of linguistic message, uncoded iconic message, coded iconic message, and anchorage.	Improves conceptual alignment of the analysis.



Annotated figure	Observed units were visually marked in Figure 2.	Provides an explicit audit trail for readers.
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Source: Author's analytical procedure.

The descriptive findings indicate that the cover is built from a compact but high-contrast sign system. The image occupies the dominant communicative space, while the verbal elements remain brief and strategically positioned. The focal visual disturbance is created by the chained feet, which interrupt an otherwise harmonious underwater atmosphere. This descriptive pattern provides the basis for the discussion that follows.

Discussion

Linguistic message and narrative horizon

At the level of the linguistic message, the title 'Laut Bercerita' is the most important verbal cue. In Barthes's framework, text on an image rarely functions as neutral information; rather, it directs the viewer toward a preferred reading by limiting the range of possible interpretations (Barthes, 1977). The title personifies the sea by attributing to it the capacity to tell or speak. This verbal move transforms the marine scene from a generic natural setting into a narrative space. Without the title, the illustration could still be read as evocative or tragic, but it might remain open as an aesthetic marine fantasy. With the title, however, the sea becomes a witness, an archive, and a medium of testimony.

The author line performs a secondary but still important rhetorical function. Although smaller in size, its placement directly beneath the title and in close proximity to the image links authorship with interpretive authority. Previous design studies note that typography does not merely deliver information; it also contributes to hierarchy, clarity, and discursive credibility (Budiarta et al., 2023). In this cover, the restrained sans-serif treatment avoids ornamental distraction and allows the illustration to remain dominant, while the author line quietly frames the work as a serious literary statement rather than as a sensational thriller or fantasy product.

Uncoded iconic message: what the cover literally shows

The uncoded iconic message consists of what can literally be seen on the cover: an underwater setting, coral and rock formations, numerous small fish, a blue-dominant color field, and two human feet emerging from the seabed, one of them visibly linked to a chain. In Barthes's terms, this level is the denoted image, the level that precedes symbolic and cultural interpretation. Its function is crucial because it provides the visible material from which more coded meanings are later produced (Barthes, 1977; Chandler, 2007).

At this literal level, the cover constructs a contrast between visual beauty and bodily disruption. The underwater environment is rendered in a soft, flowing style that suggests depth and calm, yet the chained feet interrupt the scene with a human presence that does not belong to an ordinary marine ecosystem. This tension is not yet ideological at the uncoded level, but it establishes the composition from which the coded message later emerges. Similar observations appear in cover studies in which the most effective images juxtapose atmospheric continuity with a disruptive sign that condenses the central narrative conflict (Nofia & Bustam, 2022; Prasetyo et al., 2022).

Coded iconic message: historical trauma, suppression, and memory

The chained feet no longer function merely as a body fragment once the image is read culturally and narratively. They become a sign of capture, immobilization, and violent removal from public space. In the context of *Laut Bercerita*, this coded reading resonates strongly with the novel's concern with forced disappearances and state repression during the late New Order period (Daud & Bagtayan, 2024; Hartati et al., 2024). The body is not shown in full, which intensifies the effect of erasure: identity is reduced to a fragment, and that fragment is submerged.

The underwater setting also changes meaning at the coded level. Rather than signifying only marine depth, it suggests silence, concealment, and distance from the visible social world. The sea becomes a metaphorical repository of what has been hidden or buried. The fish and coral formations intensify this rhetoric by maintaining the appearance of ordinary life within the scene. Their presence implies that the world can continue in visual beauty and natural motion even as human violence has been absorbed into the background. This is what makes the image rhetorically powerful: the cover does not stage violence as spectacle but as submerged evidence.

Color contributes to this coded message as well. The extensive use of blue can be read as an atmospheric cue of depth, but it also carries associations with melancholy, coldness, and reflective distance. Such color choices support the emotional register of grief and remembrance without resorting to explicit representations of violence. In design terms, the cover achieves symbolic condensation through harmony rather than noise, allowing the political charge to emerge through mood, contrast, and focal disturbance rather than through literal textual explanation (Imtiyaz et al., 2023; Hasian, 2017).

Anchorage: how text directs the image

The strongest contribution of Barthes's 'Rhetoric of the Image' framework lies in the concept of anchorage. On this cover, the title narrows the meaning of the marine illustration and directs the viewer to read it as a field of narrative disclosure. The sea is not simply present; it tells. This verbal cue stabilizes the coded image by suggesting that the hidden scene contains testimony waiting to be heard. Muntazori et al. (2024) found that title and image can dominate message delivery in poster design, and the same principle appears here in a literary context: a short verbal unit significantly reshapes the direction of visual reading.

Anchorage is also visible in the relationship between title placement and illustration. Because the title sits below the image, the reader first encounters the visual scene and only then receives the verbal key that reframes it. This sequence matters. The viewer initially sees an underwater world, then recognizes that the scene is narratively charged. This delayed anchorage produces a subtle but effective rhetorical shift from aesthetic appreciation to ethical attention. It is one reason the cover is more than an attractive painting; it is a controlled interpretive device.

Compared with earlier semiotic and visual studies of book covers, this reading highlights a more dynamic relationship between word and image. Nofia and Bustam (2022), as well as Zulkadinityas et al. (2026), demonstrate how cover signs carry denotative, connotative, and comparative visual meaning, but the present study shows more specifically how a small amount of text stabilizes and intensifies the meaning of a much larger visual field. The contribution of this article therefore lies in foregrounding the relational mechanism rather than merely cataloguing separate signs.

Table 3. Synthesis of rhetorical functions on the cover of *Laut Bercerita*

Sign unit	Barthesian category	Formal role on the cover	Rhetorical function	Underlying message
Title “Laut Bercerita”	Linguistic message / anchorage	Main verbal cue placed below the image	Directs the viewer to read the sea as a speaking or witnessing entity	The sea becomes a medium of testimony and memory
Author line	Linguistic message	Secondary verbal cue beneath the title	Stabilizes the literary and serious tone of the cover	The cover is framed as historical fiction rather than visual fantasy
Underwater setting	Uncoded and coded iconic message	Dominant spatial field	Creates depth, distance, silence, and concealment	Historical violence is positioned as

Sign unit	Barthesian category	Formal role on the cover	Rhetorical function	Underlying message
		occupying the illustration		submerged but not erased
Chained feet	Uncoded and coded iconic message	Disruptive focal point in the lower-left visual field	Signifies capture, immobilization, disappearance, and bodily vulnerability	Political violence is condensed into a fragment of the human body
Fish	Coded iconic message	Small repeated elements across the middle field	Maintains visual movement and ordinary life within the scene	Life continues around hidden violence
Coral-rock formations	Coded iconic message	Peripheral framing elements	Enclose the scene and intensify the impression of depth and burial	Memory is embedded within a seemingly natural environment
Blue color field	Coded iconic message	Dominant chromatic atmosphere	Produces melancholy, coldness, depth, and reflective distance	Grief and remembrance are conveyed through atmosphere rather than explicit violence

As summarized in Table 3, the cover's rhetoric is produced not by a single dominant sign but by the interaction among verbal anchorage, visual focalization, and atmospheric coding. The title provides the interpretive key, while the image supplies the sensory and emotional field through which the theme of disappearance becomes visible. The chained feet function as the strongest focal disturbance because they interrupt the beauty of the underwater composition and redirect the viewer's attention toward bodily vulnerability and forced immobilization.

The rhetoric of the cover therefore works through contrast. On the one hand, the underwater setting, fish, coral, and blue tonal field produce a calm and painterly visual atmosphere. On the other hand, the chained feet introduce an unresolved trace of violence. This contrast prevents the cover from becoming a direct illustration of political repression. Instead, it constructs repression as submerged evidence: something hidden beneath beauty, silence, and depth. The overall underlying message is that historical violence may be concealed from public visibility, but it remains present as memory, testimony, and unresolved grief.

The formal arrangement strengthens this message. The image dominates the cover in scale, making the visual field the first element encountered by the viewer. The title and author line are smaller and placed beneath the image, but their position gives them anchoring power after the visual encounter has already taken place. This creates a delayed interpretive sequence: the viewer first perceives the underwater scene, then reads the title, and finally understands the sea as a symbolic witness. The rhetorical effect depends on this sequence of seeing and reading.

Comparison with previous studies and contribution to design scholarship

The synthesis in Table 3 clarifies that this study does not merely identify denotative and connotative meanings in the cover. It shows how those meanings are rhetorically organized through anchorage, focal disturbance, visual hierarchy, and atmospheric coding. In this respect, the findings extend previous Barthesian studies of book covers, such as Nofia and Bustam (2022), by moving beyond the identification of separate signs toward an explanation of how verbal and visual signs cooperate to direct interpretation.

The findings also differ from comparative cover studies such as Zulkadinityas et al. (2026), which emphasize how visual meaning can be preserved or transformed across different editions. The present study focuses instead on the internal rhetorical mechanism of a single cover. Its contribution lies in showing that even one cover surface can produce a complex visual argument when title, illustration, color, composition, and hierarchy are read relationally.

In relation to Muntazori et al. (2024), this study confirms that title and image can become the dominant elements in message delivery. However, the cover of *Laut Bercerita* demonstrates a different rhetorical operation. In the da'wah poster context, title and image tend to guide religious message reception, whereas in this literary cover the title and image guide the viewer toward ethical attention to disappearance, trauma, and historical memory. This comparison shows that the same verbal-visual mechanism can operate across different design artifacts while producing different ideological and affective effects.

This contribution matters for visual communication design because it positions book-cover design as a medium of cultural memory rather than merely as literary packaging. The cover does not only summarize the plot or attract market attention. It visualizes the tension between beauty and violence, silence and testimony, disappearance and remembrance. For book-cover studies, the article demonstrates that cover design can function as a compact ideological statement in which visual form participates in public memory and historical reflection.

Conclusion

This study set out to explain how the cover of *Laut Bercerita* represents the novel's content through Roland Barthes's Rhetoric of the Image. The analysis shows that the cover operates through an integrated relation among the linguistic message, uncoded iconic message, coded iconic message, and anchorage. The title and author line provide the verbal frame; the underwater scene provides the literal visual field; and the chained feet, fish, coral formations, and blue atmosphere generate a coded rhetoric of suppression, loss, concealment, and memory.

The main finding is that the cover does not communicate the novel's theme through isolated symbols. Rather, it constructs a rhetorical system in which the title anchors the sea as a speaking witness, the chained feet function as a focal sign of disappearance and immobilization, and the blue underwater atmosphere transforms the visual field into a symbolic archive of historical trauma. The cover's meaning emerges from the relation between visual beauty and bodily disruption, between calm composition and violent implication.

The study contributes to visual communication design and book-cover studies by demonstrating how a literary cover can operate as a compact visual argument. It shows that typography, image, color, composition, and visual hierarchy can condense complex humanitarian and ideological concerns before the reader enters the narrative text. In the case of *Laut Bercerita*, the cover participates in the work of cultural memory by making disappearance visually present without turning violence into spectacle.

Future research could extend this approach by comparing the softcover and hardcover editions of *Laut Bercerita*, examining reader reception of the cover, or analyzing how Indonesian novel covers visualize political trauma and collective memory in contemporary publishing. Such studies would further clarify the role of book-cover design as both a commercial surface and a visual medium of historical reflection.



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