

POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES ON INDONESIAN LITERARY WORKS UNDER DUTCH COLONIALISM

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the evolution of Indonesian literature under Dutch colonial rule, focusing on how colonial ideologies and power structures were represented and how Indonesian writers resisted these narratives. The study employs a qualitative approach, analyzing literary works from the Dutch colonial period to examine Western influence on Indonesian literary expressions. Key literary pieces, such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Buru Quartet* and Sanusi Pane's poem 'Candi', are analyzed using postcolonial theory to uncover themes of indigenous identity, nationalism, freedom, and resistance. The research reveals that Indonesian literature shifted from tradition-centered themes to modernized Western genres, becoming a vehicle for critiquing social issues, challenging colonial structures, and fostering national identity. The findings highlight the significant role of literature in reflecting social realities, preserving historical events, and inspiring collective awareness and decolonization efforts in Indonesia.

Keywords: Comparative Literature, Colonialism, Nationalism, Social Justice.

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INTRODUCTION

The history of Indonesia during the Dutch colonization lasted for over three centuries, beginning with the arrival of the VOC in the early 17th century. The VOC or *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (Dutch Indies Company) was a chartered trading venture established in 1602 formed through the consolidation of various Dutch trading companies into a single, quasi-sovereign entity within the *East Indies*. The VOC was granted the authority and privilege to operate independently, backed by the Dutch government. The rights granted included the authority to monopolize the Asian spice trades, conduct political negotiations and treaties with the local ruler and establish garrison; forming armies, fortresses and enforcing laws. They could even wage wars on behalf of the Dutch government, allowing the company to effectively control and secure the trade monopolies and territorial holdings on spice-producing areas (Sukoharsono & Gaffkin, 2019). Consequently, the VOC monopoly system imposed prolonged, severe hardships on the indigenous Indonesians. The impact of the unfair system to which the locals were subjected was marked by exploitation and suffering in various aspects of social; forced labor

and slavery, political; social stratification and economic; forced cultivation (*cultuurstelsel*¹). Even after the VOC's dissolution in 1799, their influence persisted as the colonial regime of the indigenous people was later delegated to the Dutch government around the 18th century. It was around this period that Indonesian literature began to evolve, influenced by Western literary forms and ideas. As Western literature gained fame, Indonesian writers began to adopt their genres, including novels, poetry, and essays. The influence of Dutch literature was profound. Notable works by Dutch authors, particularly Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* (1860) which boldly critiqued the colonial practices, exposing the exploitation and abuse committed against the indigenous Indonesians. Muhammad (2017) argued that such works provided a framework that played a vital part in influencing Indonesian writers to articulate their own experiences and grievances, thus nurturing Indonesian thinkers and nationalist figures in the early 1900s. For instance, Raden Ajeng Kartini, a key advocate of Indonesian women's rights and education, used her work in her letters *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang* (1911) to challenge the traditional gender norms and roles through a blend of Western feminist ideas and local culture. Followed by the nationalist organization *Budi Utomo* (1908) which further sparked a literary awakening by promoting national identity, resistance and social justice.

According to Holt (1972), this movement marked the start of Indonesian writers asserting their cultural identity. By vividly depicting the suffering of Indonesians. Multatuli's work had also helped shift the public's attention to political and social reforms that resulted in the introduction of the *Ethical Policy*².

The expansion of printing and the establishment of schools initiated under the Ethical Policy gradually led to increased literacy rates among Indonesians. In spite of its primary goal to support the colonial interests, the policy inadvertently succeeded in fostering an educated class of indigenous people that eventually became the pioneers in the rise of nationalist movements. It is widely believed that the rise of Indonesian literature can be traced back to the 1920s, a time when Indonesian writers moved beyond the age of storytelling and started to experiment with the new literary forms that confronted the social issues and changes that traditional works rarely touched. Notably, the novel *Siti Nurbaya* (1922) by Marah Rusli and *Salah Asuhan* (1928) by Abdul Muis, both published by the Dutch-operated *Balai Pustaka*³ as a cornerstone examples (). These works not only questioned conventional practices but also promoted contemporary values.

Postcolonialism, a framework that analyzes the lasting impacts of colonialism on the colonized society and the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer, questions and dismantles the prevailing views built upon the imperialistic regime to foreground the perspective of those whose voices have been historically ignored or suppressed (Christiansen & Samantha, 2011). This was supported by Said (1978) in his work titled *Orientalism*, which critiqued the Western narratives of Eastern Society, power disparities and unjust social hierarchies between

¹ *Cultuurstelsel*: a Dutch monopoly system where local Indonesian people, particularly landowners, were obliged to allocate part of their land to grow crops while the local farmers had to sell their harvest to the Dutch for a fixed, low price thus depriving the landless workers of fair compensation for their labors and bringing about a large-scale hunger and impoverishment that ultimately led to tragic, substantial losses of many indigenous Indonesian lives (Manotar et al., 2022)

² *Ethical Policy*: a policy formed to improve the welfare of Indonesians in education, infrastructure and economy as a response to the growing criticism of the exploitative systems of abuse and forced labor subjected to indigenous Indonesians under the Dutch colonial rule (Kte'pi et al., 2022)

³ *Balai Pustaka*: known as Hall or Bureau of Books (Bureau voor de Volkscultuur) was an implementation of the Ethical Policy in 1917; a Dutch-controlled publishing agency made to distribute and provide literature readings to indigenous Indonesians with strict, censorship agenda (Fitzpatrick, 2000)

the imperialistic rulers and the colonized. In the context of Indonesian literature, particularly during Dutch colonialism, the literature was significantly influenced by Western literary forms that prompted the diverse, innovative literary themes and styles. Indonesian writers adopted this approach to express their national identity and cultural autonomy. Themes such as freedom, resistance and national identity were majorly explored to produce rich literary works that capture the struggle for social justice and freedom.

Praomedia Ananta Toer's *Buru Quartet* (1980-1988) is a powerful example of postcolonial work literature. In his novel, Toer critiques the effects of colonialism on Indonesian society and the construction of national identity. His works emphasized the enduring effects of colonization on the indigenous people and their pursuit of freedom and social justice. An instance of this can be seen in one of the conversation exchanged in the novel:

*"Kau juga dianggapnya Pribumi?" tanyaku hati-hati. "Aku Pribumi, Mas,"
Jawabnya tanpa ragu. "Kau heran? Memang aku lebih berhak mengatakan diri Indo. Aku lebih mencintai dan mempercayai Mama, dan Mama Pribumi, Mas."
Memang keluarga teka-teki, setiap orang menduduki tempatnya sebagai peran dalam sandiwara seram. Banyak Pribumi mengimpi jadi Belanda, dan gadis yang lebih banyak bertampang Eropa ini lebih suka mengakui Pribumi.*

(Chapter 4, Pg. 55)

The excerpt above showed a strong reflection of how colonialism affected views on indigenous identity, social roles and hint of internalized colonialism. The narrator, Minke, is the main character of one of the *Buru Quartet* series: *Bumi Manusia* or *"The Earth of Mankind"* (1980) taking the setting around the 19th century when Indonesia was still under the colonial regime. The main character, Minke is described as a descendant of a Javanese noble who had the opportunity for education despite his status as Pribumi (pure, native Indonesian). For context, Minke was talking with his friend, Annelise, an Indo girl (a term for mixed Indonesian and Dutch descendants). In *Bumi Manusia*, the Dutch are significantly more privileged in life compared to the Pribumi (indigenous Indonesians) hence why many Pribumi desire to become like the Dutch. Yet, despite possessing such advantages, Annelies who was an Indo descendant, ironically stated that she preferred being Pribumi instead. Minke's puzzled monologue hinted about the social hierarchy between the colonizer (Dutch) and the colonized (Pribumi; native Indonesians) and also, the internalized colonial mentality where the colonized idolized the colonizer's status. Hence, the *Buru Quarter's* solidified position as a vital piece to postcolonial literary discourse, essentially reflecting Indonesia's historical and cultural experience. Similarly, Ayu Utami's *Saman* (1998) addresses postcolonial concerns by engaging with issues of gender, politics and identity in post-Suharto Indonesia. Utami's work reveals the continuing influence of colonial power structures on societal dynamics and challenges controversial gender norms and roles which can be seen in the narratives below:

Tiap hari-hari ini semakin banyak orang Jawa tiru-tiru Belanda. Suami istri memberi nama si bapak pada bayi mereka sambil menduga anaknya bahagia atau beruntung karena dilahirkan. Alangkah melesatnya, alangkah naif.

(Page 140)

Tapi orang-orang masa kini lahir, dan kantor pengadilan mematri nama mereka pada akte lahir seperti sekali kutukan untuk seumur hidup. Kenapa pula aku harus memakai nama ayahku? Bagaimana dengan nama ibuku?

(Page 141)

The novel *Saman* is centered around the story of four different women; Laila, Yasmin, Cok and Shakuntala, each tackling the challenges posed by gender norms and traditions surrounding themes of female sexuality, identity and resistance in aftermath of the Dutch colonialism. According to Chairiyani (2012), the story is an embodiment of feminist perspective that stands in contrast to the dominant ideologies and perspectives of norms established by heterosexual and patriarchal society. Therefore, based on the study's background, the research will be particularly focused on observing the development of Indonesian literature under the Dutch colonial regime to examine how colonial ideologies and power structures were represented within Indonesian literary works. This study also aims to analyze the way in which Indonesian writers responded to and resisted colonial narratives, how indigenous identity and nationalism were articulated in order to promote the freedom of the nation and its people.

METHODS

The literary works produced in the period of Dutch colonization will be the primary references for this research to examine Western influence in shaping Indonesian literary expressions and how it affected the production of Indonesian literature during that period. Thus, the study will employ a qualitative approach to investigate the development of Indonesian literature under Dutch colonial rule. First, the data will be gathered from a variety of sources related to Indonesian literature produced around the Dutch colonization. This includes any kind of literary works, texts or related historical documents and scholarly articles. An analysis will be conducted, involving a close reading of selected literary texts and focusing on themes, narrative structures and elements that reflect the influence of colonialism. Theoretical framework such as postcolonial theory will be employed to interpret the texts and uncover the influence of Western culture on Indonesian literary works and how Indonesian writers interpreted Western themes and used them against the Dutch colonization while asserting and promoting the national identity.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Pre-Dutch Colonization

Early Indonesian literature was strongly influenced by Javanese culture, being the major contributor due to the flourishing kingdoms and sultanates dominating the regions shaped by Indian Hindu-Buddha traditions for over a millennium. The usage of the Sanskrit language in both Javanese and modern Indonesian demonstrated the evidence of the cultural influence, particularly in abstract terms. For example, the word "*cahaya*" in Bahasa Indonesia which means "*light*" in English, was derived from the Sanskrit word; "*chāyā*" or the Indonesian "*bahaya*" (danger) with the Sanskrit *bhaya* (Klammer, 1997). *Babad*, a key literary product of this period — long before the Dutch colonization. It consists of various accounts of history, local cultures, myths and moral values woven together using customary concepts derived from Hindu myths, notably divine kingship (Nagazumi, 1968). In ancient Javanese, kings were highly regarded for people believed that they were the manifestation of Gods and

the palace (*kraton*) was perceived to be core of the universe. Then, the court poets called *pudjangga* served to reinforce the king's authority apart from their role as intellectuals responsible for documenting the historical records. Indonesian literature went through another significant change in the latter nineteenth century. This was after the Dutch took control of the vast archipelago, shifting the focus in literary production from tradition-centered themes to modernized, Western genres and forms.

B. Under the Dutch Colonization

It was during this era that Indonesian writers began to surface and produce works that voiced their critique on social issues regarding traditional gender norms, obsolete cultural practices, class marginalization, etc. These works would later play a key role in the early construct of national identity, thus indirectly challenging the colonial structure.

Novels

Among Indonesian writers, the name Pramoedya Ananta Toer rose to prominence. His ability to blend historical context with personal narrative, dismantling colonial propaganda of its rules and elitist views of the Dutch ingrained in the locals, to invoke nationalism within indigenous Indonesians. Through his work *Buru Quartet*; a series consisting of four novels titled *Bumi Manusia* (*This Earth of Mankind* in 1980), *Anak Semua Bangsa* (*Child of All Nations* in 1980), *Jejak Langkah* (*Footsteps* in 1985) and *Rumah Kaca* (*House of Glass* in 1988).

"Anak Semua Bangsa"

The text states,

"Kehidupan ini seimbang, Tuan. Barangsiapa hanya memandang pada keceriaannya saja, dia orang gila. Barangsiapa memandang pada penderitaannya saja, dia sakit."

This means that life has a balance between happiness and suffering. If someone only focuses on happiness, they will be considered crazy because they are not aware of the actual reality of life. Conversely, if someone only focuses on suffering, they will be considered sick because they cannot see the positive side of life.

From a colonial point of view, this text can be interpreted as a critique of the colonial system that creates an imbalance in the lives of colonial societies. Colonialism often creates suffering for colonial societies, but also offers happiness and prosperity to the ruling group. This text can be seen as a warning that if colonial societies only focus on the happiness offered by colonialism, they will lose awareness of the suffering they actually experience. Conversely, if they only focus on suffering, they will be trapped in despair and unable to see a way out of the colonial situation. Thus, this text can be seen as a critique of colonialism and a call for awareness and resistance to the colonial system.

And as if the colonial perspective, this quote also provide the Post-Colonial Perspective :

"Kehidupan ini seimbang, Tuan. Barangsiapa hanya memandang pada keceriaannya saja, dia orang gila. Barangsiapa memandang pada penderitaannya saja, dia sakit" can be seen as a reflection of the postcolonial condition. The text's emphasis on the balance between happiness and suffering can be interpreted as a commentary on the complex and nuanced nature of postcolonial experiences. In the postcolonial context, societies are often grappling with the

legacy of colonialism, which has created ongoing struggles and inequalities. The text's message can be seen as a call to acknowledge and navigate these complexities, rather than simplistically focusing on either happiness or suffering.

Furthermore, the text's critique of colonialism and its emphasis on awareness and resistance can be seen as a postcolonial gesture, seeking to challenge the ongoing impacts of colonialism and promote decolonization. In this sense, the text can be seen as a postcolonial text that seeks to promote critical awareness and reflection on the ongoing legacies of colonialism, and to encourage resistance and decolonization.

Poems

The early stages of Indonesian literature were largely oral. Narratives such as folklores, myths, and epics were passed down verbally across the archipelago and later, adopted into literary forms of *syair*, *pantun* and *hikayat* (Malay form of storytelling). *Pantun* was the former form of today's poem. Traditionally, it was four-line structured, anonymous and often conveyed moral or social messages and sometimes, humor (Rosliana, 2024). But as the printing technology advanced and Western literary styles gained ground, poetry took on a more critical subject. Many Indonesian writers used their works to subtly address of injustice, cultural displacement and promote nationalism as Indonesian identity. Notably-known poets like Mohammad Yamin, Noto Soeroto, Chairil Anwar, Amir Hamzah, etc were extensively recognized for their nationalist literary contributions. But there was also a poem that presented a compelling exploration of Indonesian identity and spirit under the colonial regime. For this research, the writers have decided to analyze the poem '*Candi*' (1927) by Sanusi Pane.

Candi

*Engkau menahan empasan kala,
Tinggal berdiri indah permai,
Tidak mengabaikan serangan segala,
Megah kuat tidak terperai.*

*Engkau berita waktu yang lalu,
Masa Hindia masyhur maju,
Dilayan putra bangsawan kalbu
Dijunjung tinggi penaka ratu.*

*Aku memandang suka dan duka
Berganti-ganti di dalam hati,
Terkenang dulu dan waktu nanti.*

*Apa gerangan masa di muka
Jadi bangsa yang kucinta ini?
Adakah tanda megah kembali?*

While the poem *Candi* clearly praises the beauty and magnificence of Candi as an ancient monument of the Hindu-Buddha cultural heritage, which can be identified along the lines of the poem; "*Tinggal berdiri indah permai* (first stanza, second line)/ *Megah kuat tidak terperai* (first stanza, third line) / *Engkau berita waktu yang lalu* (second stanza, first line)/ *Masa*

Hindia masyhur maju (second stanza, second line)". Candi as a symbol of the glory of the classical civilization, its resilience and splendor remained strong and firm, uneroded by the onslaught of time. At the same time, this poem drew from postcolonial grandeur, a reflection of Indonesian history in the second stanza, 3rd and 4th lines; "*Dilayan putra bangsawan kalbu (treated as a noble-hearted son)/ Dijunjung tinggi penaka ratu (held in high regard by a queen)*". These lines may suggest that Candi was something of a significant or sacred artifact that people highly revered from how it was treated and honored like royalty. They could also be interpreted to mirror the traditional Indonesian identity in moral values, integrity and wisdom— qualities strongly respected and idealized. Finally, the last two stanzas shift to nationalism which can be identified in: "*Aku memandang suka dan duka* (stanza 3, line 1) / *Terkenang dulu dan waktu nanti* (stanza 3, line 3) / *Apa gerangan masa di muka?* (stanza 4, line 1) / *Jadi bangsa yang kucinta ini?* (stanza 4, line 2) / *Adakah tanda megah kembali?* (stanza 4, line 3)", through the writer's personal feelings, torn between joy and sorrow. Joy for the golden age the nation once had and sorrow or concern of what would become of the beloved nation. Ultimately, there was hope amidst the uncertainty that Indonesia might return to its former glory.

C. After the Dutch Colonization

After the end of the Dutch colonial period, modern Indonesian literature experienced rapid development. Although Dutch East Indies literature was still evident, there was also a renewal movement pioneered by the Angkatan Pujangga Baru. In 1933, a young literary movement began to emerge, calling itself the "*Pujangga Baru*" led by Sultan Takdir Alisjahbana. The freshness of Indonesian literature was marked by the publication of the magazine *Poedjangga Baroe* (*New Poets* in 1933). This group presented a lighter theme using high wither (*Melayu Tinggi*) language and included themes of nationalism. After the end of Pujangga Baru in 1942, not long after that a new group of writers emerged, namely Angkatan 45. They brought poetry themes that focused more on friendship and independence, in this era the Indonesian language began to develop in the era of modern literature. One of the Indonesian writers whose works focus on the modern era is Chairil Anwar one of writers from Angkatan 45: *Aku* (*Me* in 1943), *Tak Sepadan* (*Not worth it* in 1943), *Dalam Kereta* (*In the Train* in 1944).

Short Story

The short story genre has its roots in ancient oral traditions, where brief, pointed anecdotes and fables were used to convey moral lessons and tell engaging stories. These stories were often delivered in rhythmic poetry, making them easy to remember and pass down through generations. The short story evolved over time, influenced by the emergence of realistic novels and the collection of anecdotes and fables from ancient civilizations, such as Aesop's Fables and the Gesta Romanorum. As a literary form, the short story has been shaped by its ability to convey complex ideas and emotions in a compact and concise way, making it a popular and enduring form of literature. The most insightful analyses of the short story were frequently restricted to a particular area or time period, and the genre as a whole received comparatively little critical attention until the middle of the 20th century. Irish short story author Frank O'Connor tried to define the genre in his book *The Lonely Voice* (1963), claiming that stories served as a vehicle for "submerged population groups" to challenge the

prevailing community.” The short story the writers analyzed is *Tea and Pengkhianat* (2017) by Iksaka Banu in *Koran Tempo*. The writers selected this short story (cerpen) because it acts as a significant historical event in Java during the colonial rule, particularly the systemic oppression the indigenous Indonesians had to endure. This literary text also serves as a source of understanding the harsh realities and complexities in an attempt to resist Dutch colonialism. Certain excerpts of the text will be used to analyze history in Java and Dutch colonial atrocities against the indigenous population.

Ya, kami sudah mendengar kerusuhan. Berdarah di perkebunan the beberapa. Hari lalu. Tetapi tidak mengira. Perkembangannya begini cepat dan buruk. Apakah peristiwa ini akan memicu perang besar lagi? Sesungguhnya kami sudah muak mengangkat senjata. Belum lagi mengenyam kehidupan tenteram setelah perang Jawa berakhir.

(TdP: 31)

The excerpt above hinted that there were riots on the tea plantations, but more importantly, the context of the Java War. The Java War refers to the conflict between colonial troops and Javanese troops led by Prince Diponegoro. This proves the cruelty of the colonial invaders towards the native population, because they deliberately started a war against the natives. The native’s response was to fight to protect themselves. The following text will further strengthen the picture of social conditions in history.

“Memang. Akibat kondisi keuangan yang memburuk, ditambah para petani yang sudah bosan diajak perang, dan pajak pasar yang tak bisa lagi dikutip oleh pasukannya, Sentot bersama 500 orang tentara andalannya mendatangi markas kami. Jendral De Kock sendiri yang menyambutnya. Ia diberi pangkat Letnan kolonel, diberi gaji tetap dan diperbolehkan memimpin pasukannya sendiri. Ini penugasan pertama mereka. Masalahnya, percayakah engkau kepada pengkhianat yang meninggalkan junjungan yang semula sangat ia hormati demi uang?...

(TdP:40)

Sentot, a warlord of Prince Diponegoro, was willing to surrender to the Dutch colonialists in exchange of monetary gain. Subsequently, Sentot led the suppression of Chinese rebels who had previously allied themselves to fight the oppression of ethnic Chinese and native people. Sentot’s betrayal, siding with the colonialists who had subjugated the natives had left a lasting mark in history which was emphasized by the text below.

“Kalau begitu, kami pamit!” Sentot memberi aba-aba. Pandangannya menjauh. “Ada tugas lagi?” Sentot menunjuk satu arah dengan ibu jarinya. “Memadamkan perang di sana! Orang-orang Padri!”

(TdP: 44)

From the Dutch colony, Sentot received an order to quell the Padri War in West Sumatra. However, historical records showed that after Sentot succeeded, he was exiled instead and died. In the end, Sentot was one of the victims of fraud by the Dutch colonials who manipulated and exploited him for their own interests. Taine’s views on social facts or the social environment are relevant here because according to Setiawan (2020), the Java War began in 1825 under the leadership of Sentot Alibasah, a seventeen-year-old young war commander. Taine’s concept in literary sociology involves analysis of race, moment and

environment to reveal social facts. Based on the short story analysis, the social facts revealed are the bloody events in the Banda area as an example of colonial cruelty against natives.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that Indonesian literature continues to experience development. Significantly, in the colonial era Dutch era. The writers believe that it is important, particularly for Indonesians, to understand how our literature conveyed and portrayed the colonial period in works of earlier generations. Literature is a reflection of life that can help us understand ourselves and society. Thus, studying literature can enrich our experience and broaden our horizons. Literary works have the ability to inspire and influence their readers. In a nation as culturally diverse as Indonesia with its rich tapestry of language, traditions and beliefs, this country rich in diversity of culture, traditions and beliefs, literature is not simply art but also a science that preserves the monumental historical events, shaping collective awareness based on the social realities reflected. Many Indonesian literary works offer profound insights on the colonial experience, revealing the struggle and resistance of the indigenous people under the Dutch regime. Studying Indonesian literature can help us gain a deeper understanding of how our society transformed throughout the Dutch colonial rule and afterward. Moreover, we foster greater appreciation for our own identity and culture as Indonesians.

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