

**Every Book has a Voice:
A Postcolonial Reading of *Gadis Pantai* and *Larasati***

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Abstract

Albeit the Western domination of knowledge production in the world today, postcoloniality should be understood as an interaction between imperial legacy and local wisdom. Actively struggling to make meanings out of their colonial experience, the local people are not passive recipients of external influence and imposition. Such notions as hybridity and border crossing have thus challenged the geopolitical binary of “the West and the Rest”. The global scene of today is a conversation of many voices.

This chapter argues that Indonesia, as a member of postcolonial society, has its literature shaped by this global-local encounter during both colonial and postcolonial times. As it is, Indonesian literature has its role in having enriched the universal and local aesthetics in the formation of World Literatures. This argument is consolidated with textual analyses of Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s novels *Gadis Pantai* (1987) and *Larasati* (2000). Given the specific postcolonial conditions, the female characters in both novels come across as autonomous and having their individual voices that cannot be reduced into one single voice as that of the “Third World Women”.

Introduction

When the first Indonesian President Sukarno died in 1970, the Western media was apparently thrilled in reporting about his death. To the Western world, the staunch nationalist Sukarno with his anti-West policy was a refutation of the inevitability of Western domination. In contrast, the recent passing of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, another nationalist figure and unfaltering supporter of Sukarno’s ideas, has invited different reactions as major publications worldwide profiled his obituary with due respect. To his Western audience, Pramoedya, unlike Sukarno, was a courageous opponent of tyrannous governments whilst a controversial literary figure in his own country. Pramoedya is among the darlings of world history and literature, whereas Sukarno remains notorious, if not a nemesis, to some regimes of knowledge. Why was one a friend, and the other, a potential foe, even if both spoke of the violence of Indonesian history which was irrevocably contingent upon the country’s colonial experience for which the Western world was partly responsible? Is it because Pramoedya, whose whole life chronicled twentieth century Indonesian history, was plainly incomparable to Sukarno, who neither suffered from nor survived the yet unfinished revolution the way Pramoedya did? Or else, is it because, as times

progresses, the narrative of the decolonized nation and its ex-colonial Master has undergone radical changes?

Invoking this dissimilar reaction toward the death of the two postcolonial actors, separated for thirty-six years by time, I shall illustrate that notwithstanding contemporary globalization, postcoloniality has often continued to be understood in terms of Western conceptualization, neglecting as it does the possible interaction between the imperial legacy and local wisdom. Instead, it can be argued that the local people or the colonized were not merely passive receptors of external practices imposed by the colonizers. People like Sukarno and Pramoedya, for example, has always actively struggled to make meanings out of their colonial experiences, hence their proud, honorable, and nationalist sentiments. Geopolitical dualism of the so-called “West and the Rest” has now become increasingly blurred by the notions of hybridity and border crossing. The global scene of today is a conversation of many voices.

This chapter argues that Indonesia has its literature shaped by this global-local encounter during colonial and postcolonial times. Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s novels *Gadis Pantai* (1962) and *Larasati* (1960) are cited as texts that prove the limitations of an essentialist category and/or identity such as Third World Women, for instance. As reminded by Chandra Mohanty’s seminal article, Western feminist writings have often used their own yardstick for measuring the cultures of the indigenous women in relation to their Western counterparts (Mohanty 1988: 61-68). Why should the experience of women in the West become the models for emulation by Third World Women, i.e. educated, liberated modern women vis-à-vis unlearned, oppressed traditional women? Similarly, Gayatri Spivak further challenges liberal Western assumptions of Third World Women as being caught between two forms of domination, namely, patriarchy and imperialism, which do not allow them to speak for themselves but be spoken for by men (Ashcroft 1995: 24-28). I shall borrow and combine combined views of Mohanty and Spivak: women may be said to share a common situation, but each instance of being a woman is historically specific. It is precisely this constant historical vigilance that underpins my discussion of the female characters in the novels under study.

Set in a turn-of-the-century coastal area north of Java, *Gadis Pantai* [*The Girl from the Coast*] is a narrative about a 14-year-old fishing village girl forcedly disconnected from her simple, peaceful life, to live in the rich yet strange house of the pious local nobleman Bendoro. As Bendoro’s practice wife, the girl learns that such an unstable relationship has cost her

estrangement from people of her own class, including her family members, as well as her own newly born baby girl. Derived partly from the story of the loveless arranged marriage of Pramoedya's own rebellious grandmother, the novel breaks the traditionally constructed image of submissive women in patriarchal society.

Similarly, *Larasati* undercuts the conventional notion of gender roles in the times of war, as Larasati (Ara), the popular film star character in the novel, creates her own way to defend the ideals of Revolution. The heroine's entanglement with men of various political beliefs interrupts the otherwise politically biased portrayal of the Indonesian armed struggle of the 1940s.

In these stories, institutions, be they family or state, are the sites of patriarchal oppression and a social unit that must be defended against class discrimination.

Condition of Postcoloniality: Theory and Practice

As a theoretical approach, "postcolonial" can be seen as both a limiting and all-encompassing term. What is constitutive of postcoloniality? Given that one of the major concerns in Postcolonial Studies is the search for cultural identity, it is important to define and to continually redefine a specific paradigm of postcoloniality to suit wide-ranging colonial experiences from time to time. Using the term 'postcolonial' to refer to "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day", the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, assert that nearly four-fifths of the globe has been affected by colonialism (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin 1989: 2). Added to this plethora of postcolonial experiences is the fact that identity itself is characteristically political. Thus, we need to examine the intertwinement of history, theory, and politics in order to grasp power relations that occur between the colonizers and the colonized. This is to say that no theoretical concept arising from one culture can be transposed unproblematically to different cultures without considering the limits of applicability. In order to determine the precise nature of postcoloniality, it is necessary to clarify, for example, the complex structure of historical stages and the distinction between settler and native whilst adding the proviso that the postcolonizer—postcolonized oppositionality need not correspond to the binary of settler—native (Mbembe 2001: 235).

To illustrate, postcolonialism according to the thesis of Ashcroft and others begins at the point of colonization, whereas postcolonial Indonesia can be interpreted more precisely as the end of colonization. This model is further complicated by Indonesia's feasible colonizing aims in several provinces of the country. The annexation of East Timor to the Republic of Indonesia in

1975, for example, is a case in point, until Indonesia finally agreed in 1999 to let the East Timorese voted between independence and local autonomy; and by 2002 this youngest province declared its independence as Timor Leste.

This paper argues that there are at least three conditions upon which postcolonial discourse can stand, namely, **positioning marginality**, **struggle for resistance**, and **creation of space**. In light of these three conditions, the two novels by Pramoedya are examined with a specific focus on the female characters. An analysis of the process of growth and maturation reflected in the characters helps reveal the novels' different perspectives on, for example, exploitation and liberation. Each concept is unique and predetermined by the particular postcolonial experiences at particular geographical, socio-economic, political and historical junctures.

Positioning Marginality. Having no geometric implications, the term 'marginality' here is taken to mean 'limited access to power.' Among the so-named marginalized group are the colonized, the oppressed, and the underprivileged. To Achille Mbembe, this grouping is synonymous with "the slave, the animal and the native ... whose body can be degraded, whose life can be mutilated, and whose work and resources can be squandered with impunity" (Mbembe 2001: 235). As a critical enterprise, postcolonialism positions the marginalized back to power, hence deconstructs the margin–centre binary. A text, therefore, can be termed 'postcolonial' if it is constructed out of the perspectives of the marginal group.

While it is hard to deny that most modern Indonesian novels embody the typical ideals of women as the dutiful wife and nurturing mother, the representation of women in *Gadis Pantai* and *Larasati* seems to step outside this categorization even if the women in the novels belong to the marginal group. Caught in the contradiction between the public and private spheres, the main characters in both novels have to negotiate their subject-positioning. In *Gadis Pantai*, the author describes the bravery of the formerly innocent, young woman in putting up with all the societal and familial norms beyond her comprehension by becoming a practice wife:

Last night she was married. Married to a kris. At that moment she knew: She no longer a child of her father. She was not her mother's child anymore. She was now a wife of a kris, a representative of a man she had never met before in her life. (*Gadis Pantai*, 2)¹

¹ My Translation here and elsewhere of the novels studied herein.

As if the fear of incomprehension was not enough, being taken to town the next day after the wedding day,² the young woman was also to endure fear of place – the Bendoro’s rich, orderly, sacred house along with the family intrigues therein. She found it hard to understand why even her father, who was never afraid of sea, was now afraid of the Bendoro, hence giving away his daughter to the noble man. The narrator evokes *Gadis Pantai*’s puzzlement as follows:

Is the Bendoro more powerful than sea, inasmuch that her father ran away? Two of her brothers died, taken by the sea, yet they never ran away from the sea. Neither did her father run away. But why did he run away this time? She herself is never afraid of sea. But why afraid of the Bendoro? Why? Her father is sturdier and stronger than the Bendoro. The Bendoro is slim, pale-faced; his skin is too soft; he has no muscle. Why is it that everyone fears him? I fear him too. (*Gadis Pantai*, 34)

Here, the fear provides much of the novel’s socio-political commentary, targeting issues such as class, power, and hypocrisy. Yet, as the story goes, the young woman managed to encounter all adversity with courage.

That marginality is approached with new positioning is also evident in *Larasati*. Despite the female character Ara’s otherwise vulnerable position as an unmarried woman among men with ‘masculine’ pursuits, she comes across as unusually brave, single-minded, and loyal to the ideals of the war and revolution. Naturally, Ara is subject to male domination; for example, she provides sexual entertainment to the Dutch-spy Jusman so that she could escape the Dutch army’s arrest. But, the narrator tells us, Jusman loves Ara, hence a repositioning of her marginality. The fact that she finally marries the man of her own choice – a man who does not betray the nation’s aspirations for freedom—puts marginalization back to the center of power. *Larasati* is aware that as an actress she belongs to everybody including the Japanese soldiers from whom she obtained a lot of money for the propaganda movies she made for them. Hence, she has this to say: “I am not a traitor. I have my own country. Right or wrong, this is the earth of mankind on which I live. Only an animal follows the Dutch.” (*Larasati*, 7) As such, there is a negotiated position here in the depiction of the main characters of both novels; they are not at all subservient, instead they fight back to win the place of their own choosing.

² In Javanese culture, so intimate is the relationship between a man and his kris that the weapon becomes a symbol when seated next to a Javanese bride in the event that her bridegroom is absent on the wedding day.

Struggle for Resistance. “Thanks to the phallus,” Achille Mbembe writes, “the colonizer’s cruelty can stand quite naked: erect” (Mbembe 2001: 175). Politics of the body is another key site in postcolonial discourse. Writing about colonialism and its lasting impact on the African experience, Mbembe is convinced that the colonized is seen as a corporeal object of fascination and fear. Thus, even up until the post-independence period, the autocrats (Mbembe’s term) act as colonizers who seduce and coerce their own people. This newly emerging form of colonialism is perpetuated by the imbalanced structure of the pallocratic ex-colony, as well as through continual oppression of women and the underprivileged by powerful male (government) administrators. Complicity towards colonialist thinking, likened by Mbembe to the male private organ and its vulgarity, is often interrupted, though not always successful, by threats of oppositional forces.

Postcoloniality in *Gadis Pantai* operates through this mode of resistance. Here, moments of postcolonialism thus commence once resistance to the dominant power takes place. The notion of practice wife reproduces the gendered role of female passivity, but Pramoedya presents this “tradition” as a code of conduct that reveals the brutality of Javanese feudalism in nurturing women’s subjection, i.e. women as subject for and of men. In so doing, the author mocks the corrupt colonial practices that tend to privilege men by ignoring the meaningful presence of women. I shall quote generously the narrator’s account on Gadis Pantai’s uncompromising effort to take her newborn baby girl with her as she was discarded and ordered to leave the Bendoro’s house.

“I am the mother of the baby. If her father has refused even to touch her, much less to look after her, then I’d better take her with me to my village.” The Bendoro wriggled to get up from his rocking chair. He stood up to look at Gadis Pantai who wore her head down staring at the floor. “Rebuke me, Bendoro. But an infant is not jewelry, not a ring, not a necklace to throw at anybody.” “Have you planned for quite some time to flee with the child then?” Gadis Pantai lifted up her head, fixing her eyes at the Bendoro’s. Slowly she stood erect with the baby in her arms. “Even a hen is capable of defending her young, Bendoro. So am I, a human being, although I’ve never read the Koran in the mosque.” “Go away!” Gadis Pantai turned her back at the Bendoro, and carrying the baby, she walked quickly toward the door. [] “Stop her” the Bendoro cried swinging his cane. Like a platoon of soldiers the male and female servants tried to stop and ambushed Gadis

Pantai. “I am not a thief” Gadis Pantai cried at the top of her voice. “I have left everything in my room. This is the only thing I take. My own child,” said she, kicking away a servant but the rest come to squeeze her. “Thief” the Bendoro scolded her. “Quick. Leave the infant right away. Do you want me to call the police?” “I only bring my own possession. A baby. The baby I myself delivered to this world. She is my child; her father is a Satan, a devil. Let me go!” (*Gadis Pantai*, 224-5)

Here, Gadis Pantai’s behavior can be taken as the author’s disapproval to the nobility’s double-standards – a seemingly religious person but inhuman in his treatment to the “lesser breed”, because this scene finally ends with Gadis Pantai being beaten up by the Bendoro like an animal as she refused to leave the baby in the Bendoro’s household. Then again, Gadis Pantai’s doggedness to come back to the strange place a few weeks later to see her daughter breaks down the usual portrayal of traditional women with unconditional devotion to patriarchy and feudalism.

Similarly, in *Larasati* the female character who fights back is yet another proof that Pramoedya’s work begs to be read as a discourse of resistance. At one point in the story, Larasati’s boyfriend, partly burnt by jealousy and concern about her safety, reprimanded her for being so daring as to enter the war zone. Reaching the height of their fiery quarrel, he shouted at our heroine this derision “What sort of woman are you” to which Larasati answers, “Don’t face me as a woman of any sort, but face the problem she encounters.” (*Larasati*, 49). We are soon told that Larasati has the better argument. Here we see the representation of an unusual character (a movie star and a female one at that) who is given a space in a story about war, thus acknowledging that the Indonesian independence was fought for by men and women alike.

Creation of Space. Postcolonial discourse seeks to create knowledge outside the West. Using the Latin American experience of colonialism, Walter Mignolo provides an important contribution to postcolonial theory through his notion of “border thinking” and “double critique” (Mignolo 2000: 91 –126). In order to break away from Western epistemology, Mignolo suggests that one needs to consider all knowledge and/or tradition borne out of the colonial and the subalternized alike. To put it simply, it is important to know what it is like to be the slave and the master. Taking into account Mignolo’s concept, it is important to consider every individual experience of becoming a colonized subject, mindful of the fact that the creation of space in Indonesian context as a once colonized country needs to also include aspects of class and gender.

For Pramoedya, for example, no knowledge has more power than one's own experience, which in this case includes his entanglements with the women in his life, as well as understanding what these women had experienced throughout their lives. As Hellwig shows, the characterization of the un-named girl in *Gadis Pantai* is modelled after the novelist's grandmother Satima and his mother Saidah who are Pramoedya's self-sufficient heroes (Hellwig1994: 82 –95). It appears that there is continuity of the presence of role-model female characters in Pramoedya's work. The following is Pramoedya's own statement, illustrating that he looks no further for his model of (female) hero in his books:

Neither my grandmother nor my mother are [sic] forgotten. The literal meaning of the Indonesian word for hero, pahlawan, is a person –not someone necessarily grand, just regular person- whose life benefits others. My grandmother and mother benefited me. They are my role models. They live in all the people who have ever had to fight to be themselves. (Toer 2002: 46-47)

In the novels discussed, we see that Mother is the source of solace and advice for both *Gadis Pantai* and *Larasati*. But Pramoedya's female hero *par excellence* who is often recycled as the model for his female characters could have been Kartini, about whom Pramoedya published the two-volume biography *Panggil Aku Kartini Saja [Just Call me Kartini]* (1962), thus revealing this writer-emancipator's role in educating the nation. In the introduction to the volumes, Pramoedya writes:

Thus far, Kartini has been mentioned in various commemorations as a mythological figure instead of an ordinary human being. This inevitably undermines the greatness of Kartini as to position her in the realms of deity. The less knowledge about her there is, the stronger her status as a myth stands. Her portrayal is thus distorted. As people ignore truth, they consume only the opium of myth. Indeed Kartini is far greater than the total sum of myths about her. (Toer 1962: x) [My Translation]

Pramoedya then continues to state that “Kartini is an originator [konseptor], or someone from the Brahman class, to use the Hindu caste system” in explaining that she is the first modern thinker (Toer 1962: xii). In my interview with him on 18 September 2002, for example, Pramoedya reiterated his admiration of Kartini, and he appeared troubled by people's ignorance of history when they opt instead for myths.

I believe that it is a woman like Kartini that Pramoedya used invariably as a template for *Gadis Pantai* and *Larasati*, as well as the supporting female characters: individuals capable of becoming instigators for society at large—leaders. In various episodes in the novels, women figure significantly. The mothers in both novels through their daily lives inspire their children to be tough and self-sufficient. Larasati's mother, for example, is a single parent from whom her daughter has learned about difficult life in time of war. Meanwhile, the tough world of women in traditional society is depicted effectively by the author through all working women in the fishing village including *Gadis Pantai*'s mother. Especially in *Gadis Pantai*, beside the mother figure, also included in the picture of resourceful women is the sympathetic servant in the Bendoro's residence, and, to some extent, the *Gadis Pantai*'s prospective competitor Mardinah.

Gadis Pantai and *Larasati* however deserve more mention than other characters in the respective stories, as these two novels locate the main characters in positions of power. Both novels thus offer the possibility of global design from the perspective of local/individual histories. Each narrative of the two Javanese women herein helps illustrate that women in the Third World have their own individual, specific stories. Both women come across as having imbibed radical spirit of liberating themselves from the strictly patriarchal (Javanese) society and family. That being said, the generic term "Third World Women" will eventually become meaningless, as all women in the world have shared experience yet separated inimitably by specific history, time, and place.

Conclusion

The array of characters that appear in *Larasati* and *Gadis Pantai* invites profound reflections on the historical and political problems of contemporary times. Indeed, the novelist would not be who he is without addressing social implications of class and gender encounters in the novel. This he achieves in both novels with utmost simplicity. If *Gadis Pantai* is Pramoedya's critique of Dutch colonialism and feudalism by exposing the elite's contempt for social class and marriage, *Larasati* is Pramoedya's interrogation of the notion that the only way a woman might get mainstream attention is through her sexuality.

While the women in both novels struggle in a predominantly male world, so too do their male counterparts share the common difficulties in finding their place in the same world tainted by colonialism. But, written in the 1960s, the novels question the homogeneity of the role of

women in such diverse postcolonial conditions by providing each character with her own distinct experience depending on the respective power-relation and its ensuing negotiation. What may come as a comfort in marriage for the young woman in *Gadis Pantai* may be an ordeal for Ara, and none of them would have conceived the idea of all-men-are-oppressors. Given the specific postcolonial conditions of the women in both novels, their individual voices cannot be reduced into one single voice as that of the “Third World Women”. As it is, we can only speak of *a* woman’s experience rather than *the* woman’s experience as each woman here is autonomous.

Thus, through the two works discussed herein, not only has Indonesian literature participated in the rethinking of the West as the sole authority of knowledge, but also enriched the universal, local and individual aesthetics within the formation of World Literatures. Finally, for Kipling’s aficionados, it is about time to also include the subsequent line “But there is neither East nor West, border, nor breed, no birth/ When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth”, when quoting the author’s “Oh, East is East and West is West/ And never the twain shall meet.” And in the case of Pramoedya (or Sukarno, for that matter), the Kiplingesque dictum here is extended to two strong women.

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Biodata

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