



The Impact of Colonisation on Women in 'Child of All Nations'

Hamid Farahmandian

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,
Universiti Putra, MALAYSIA

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to scrutinize the three influential characters (Nyai Ontosoroh, Surati and Annelis) in the novel in order to explore and look into their portrayal, in hope to detect any form of resistance of the female characters, their acceptance and rejection of their relationship with either the colonial power in general or male characters (either husband, father or son) and to deduce whether colonialism is the core cause for such phenomenon. The paper would then try to infer the significance of the relationship between colonialism and Indonesian women by figuring out why these female characters perform certain actions and the state of empowerment they were in at the moment.*

Keywords: *Colonisation, Double Colonisation, Indonesian Literature, Women, Autonomy*

I. Introduction

South East Asian fictions are distinctive for their precision in depicting reality and intense social consciousness thus, constructing a new order of history for its constituents. Possessing a history constructed by migration and colonialism, Indonesian novelist shoulder the challenge of recreating the experience and at the same time create the ideals of which can be contested and criticised. Since the ideals lack in strength and foregrounding, the task of a fiction writer is made complex, where the depiction of the characters have to somehow relate to the sociological norms and act as though they are forever conscious of the task in defining their society based on their social contextual setting.

Pramoedya addresses this issue and reasons the urge to write:

"Following the events of 1965, I lost everything or, to be more accurate, all the illusions I had ever owned. I was a new born child, outfitted with the only instrument a newly born baby finds necessary for life: a voice. Thus like a child my only means of communication was my voice: my screams, cries, whimpers, and yelps. What would happen to me if my voice, my sole means of communication, were to be taken from me? Is it possible to take from a man his right to speak to himself?" (Toer, *The Mute's Soliloquy*)

The broken system and failed attempts which horrifies Pramoedya are not merely of people where they may have been stilled or mimic others (usually colonisers) but the lack of depth in themselves. The degradations of Indonesia have been endured, yet the attempt serves to be irrelevant. The Indonesian literature remains inseparable from the country's political realities and any attempt to distinguish both remains futile. It is undeniable that the construction of Indonesian literature is closely intertwined to the developing national identity. One of the major contributing factor remains that the creation of its literature employs an ideal that is pseudo-native heavily influenced by Western traditional literary values via colonialism.

Child of All Nations is perhaps one of the best examples to show this stoic nature of Pramoedya towards Indonesia. He offers a dry-eyed resilience towards the tragic nature of his home and transmits clearly his concerns and perhaps his futility of the ill-fated conditions of his land through the novel. In the customary literary scene, scholars lament and even question can justice be created when women's are narrated by men? Personally, adequate justice can be inferred in order to comprehend the paradoxical setting when women's stories are narrated by Pramoedya-a man. He perhaps offers the best rationale when he reasons,

"My mother was a person of inestimable value, the flame that burns so bright it leaves no ash. Do not be surprised, therefore, that when I look back at the past I see the Indonesian revolution embodied in the form of a woman-my mother."
(Toer, *The Mute's Soliloquy*)

Women have often overlooked in the history of struggle of the Indonesian nation. In the history books of the nation, readers are more familiar with male heroic figures than female, thus, undermining women's roles in the establishment of a nation called Indonesia. This then solidifies Pramoedya's reason to carve out strong female characters in his novel. He presents a range of Indonesian women from the strong-hearted, determined ones to docile and innocent ones. This paper attempts to categorize and investigate to what extent has colonialism played its part in contributing to this scenario.

It is however, to my utmost concern to discuss of colonialism and its correlation towards Indonesian women in order to fulfil the requirement of this paper. In order to do so, I have attempted to read and treat Pramoedya's *Child of All Nations* as a case study rather than merely treating it as another literary work. Hence, I have endeavoured to nail down the essence of this novel in parallel to my research and correlate them to my selection of framework of "double colonialism" (Postcolonial Theory) and "female resistance" (Feminist Theory). This attempt is made in relation to highlight the urgency of this paper in quintessence to Indonesian literature and role of women under the influence of colonialism in general.

As Razif Bahari argues in his book entitled '*Pramoedya Postcolonially*', the tetralogy and its literary and social context may provide valuable insights regarding the force (colonialism) which drives the main character to obtain power and freedom, and could answer some of the questions regarding the construction of history, language, and gender within postcolonial literature literary studies (Petri, 2009). I do admit that these four main characters from Pramoedya's novel could not encompass the entire population of the Indonesian women and perhaps could not even be taken as absolute representatives of women in the entire society. However, my argument here to rationalize my selection of the characters to be studied as these characters' behaviour and reaction towards the circumstances or situations are general ones and this story was made on the merit of the diverse characteristics that they possess due to the influence of colonisation.

In late colonial period of Dutch colonisation in the Indies, reformatory policies in education and marriage potentially opened up more room for women's autonomy. These policies challenged the full autonomy of indigenous men. However, the growth of the nationalist spirit of the period had the effect of re-asserting hegemonic masculinity. The ambivalences and ambiguities accompanying the interference of the colonial authority in gender-related matters, such as marriage and education for girls, can be seen in the representation of male protagonists in three novels written in the late phase of Dutch colonisation.

Edward Said offers the following distinction: "imperialism" means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; "colonialism", which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory' (Said 1993: 8). Colonialism, then, is a form of cultural contact which is influential in the construction of gender relations. Beside Indian and Islamic influences, European influences brought about by Dutch colonialism were pivotal in the construction of gender relations during the process of state formation that eventually resulted in the modern nation state of Indonesia. (Ashcroft, Key Concepts)

Double colonisation is a term coined in the mid-1980s, and usually identified with Holst-Petersen and Rutherford's *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing* published in 1985. (Ashcroft, Key Concepts) The term refers to the observation that women are subjected to both the colonial domination of empire and the male domination of patriarchy. In this respect empire and patriarchy act as analogous to each other and both exert control over female colonial subjects, who are, thus, doubly colonized by imperial/patriarchal power. The rising awareness of women's rights as one of the impacts of modernity introduced by Dutch colonisation needs to be taken into account. The awareness emerged as Dutch colonial policies to reform the well-being of indigenous people were institutionalised in the late phase of colonial period. These reformatory policies affected woman's identity and how they challenged indigenous masculinities in the late stages of the colonial encounter.

In late colonial period, both in Indonesia and elsewhere, female colonial subjects often became the object and site of the imposition of reformatory colonial policies. In the minds of reformist such as Pramoedya, he respect is ever evident for the real life character, Kartini mentioned in his novel in lines,

"This feeling developed in Kartini's heart, because she knew that in the field of progress, she was their valid heir. She felt called by history to work for eternity, to serve the people (rakyat) of her country. Without a doubt, it is clear that this call, indistinct or clear, had also been heard by her forebears." (Pramoedya, *Panggil Aku Kartini Saja*, 1: 32)

Feminist studies in the field of literary studies are still at its infancy in South East Asia leave alone Indonesia, as represented by the marginalization of women and their issues from literary criticism. This paper has categorized the significant female characters in the novel into three main categories; "The Loud One", "The Silent One" and "The Muted One". One might ponder the urgency to do this, and perhaps the best justification is that even though these characters live under one roof- the same setting- colonial Indonesia, they possess character traits that are convergent.

At the exposition of the novel, the Nyai Ontosoroh is introduced as an exceptional native woman, the concubine of a Dutch property owner called Herman Mellema, and to her beautiful daughter, Annelies. One example of a culturally-marked word containing an important socio-cultural reference in the novel is the term "Nyai". Nyai originally refers to a respectful form of address to a Javanese woman. However, the form undergoes a considerable change of meaning when it is adapted used into Indonesian. It becomes a "euphemistic, pejorative, and disrespectful term" referring to a historical stereotype of a native concubine or mistress in a colonial Dutch East Indies household and implying the inherent social attitude behind the notion "nyai" (Petri, 2009)

The moral level of the families of nyais were always associated with the terms “*low*”, “*dirty*”, “*without culture*”, “*moved only by lust*”. They were the families of prostitutes; they were people without character, destined to sink into nothingness, leaving no trace. All social classes had passed judgment on the nyai; also all races: Native, European, Chinese, Arab (This Earth, 54). The Dutch colonialism has thus, forged the positive notion of “nyai” to a term associated to the concubine-cum-servants/slaves of male Dutch colonialists. Nyais were a necessary evil, and considerations of profit outweighed “moral” ones (not that colonialism was moral in the first place).

Nyai Ontosoroh is one of the leading female characters in the novel where Pramoedya equates her as the representation of women who were born and live in the nation before of independence of Indonesian nation. Although born from the lowest class in the structure of Indonesian society and never earned the right to attend school, Nyai Ontosoroh has a large role in the Indonesian struggle until the establishment of an independent Indonesian nation.

Hence, it is apt to put her into the category of ‘The Loud One’ for the purpose of my discussions. Some of the questions that provoke the reader who attempts to understand this novel in perspectives of women and colonialism would be: what is Nyai Ontosoroh’s role in the struggle of the Indonesian nation. One main conclusion would be that Nyai Ontosoroh is a representation of women in Indonesia who has a big role in realizing national independence of Indonesia. Her role is not only in the form of concrete action, but her conviction to have more faith in the native’s own strength than to rely on foreign strength like the Dutch colonial government.

Over time, Nyai Ontosoroh becomes an important figure in Minke’s life, his personal life mentor and spiritual mother. When Nyai discovers that Minke wants to be a writer, she tells him to

“Write always about humanity, humanity’s life, not humanity’s death. Yes, whether it’s animals, ogres, gods, or ghosts that you present, there’s nothing more difficult to understand than humanity. That’s why there is no end to the telling of stories on this earth.”

The story of her origin, how she was sold into “concubinage” by her father, her rise in position as the overseer of her master’s entire estates and businesses, as well as the fate of her daughter, Annelies. The vital role of Nyai Ontosoroh in Minke’s life, as the person who is mostly responsible for Minke’s growing awareness of the oppression of the Dutch colonial towards rule over him and his fellow countrymen, in some way, represents in some way the indispensable role of language in growing nationalism in Indonesia. The Dutch education system has thus, directly and indirectly acted as a catalyst in moulding Nyai Ontosoroh. The account of Nyai Ontosoroh’s life, her extraordinary characteristics and excellent ability in to absorbing the knowledge given by her Dutch master and using it to climb up from the bottom to the top rank of the colonial society, may have an indirect association with the historical development of the Indonesian language and its elevated status as a national language today.

Bearing in mind, Nyai Ontosoroh’s social status as a ‘Nyai’ (due to Dutch social classification), she has always presented strong opinions concerning the Dutch and the colonization of the Indies. Throughout the novel she can be seen lecturing Minke on different subjects, especially when it comes to the Dutch colonists and how the Native people are being treated. She tries to show him a perspective he would not have known in his Dutch schooling. Despite her strength, the death of her daughter and departure of her disgraced son Robert have left her feeling lonely and dependent on Minke as her only remaining family. Not only does she continuously give him advice and her opinions, but she is also a living example of the oppression of the Javanese.

Another unique character that’s worth to be mentioned here is Surati, the daughter of Sastro Kassier. She is resilient in her own ways, adhering to her father’s rulings yet attempts to defy them to some extent. This characteristic of her enables me to label her as ‘The Silent One’. She was once beautiful, but lost her beauty to smallpox. Her father was tricked into selling his daughter as the only way to maintain his position as paymaster. Traditionally, female’s opinion is not valued, as demonstrated by Sastro’s response to his wife’s protests, telling her, “*What does a woman know? Your world is no more than a tamarind seed.*”

The entire Chapter Seven highlights the different kinds of power relationships imposed on female within the novel. The unfortunate story of Surati provides a microcosm of the situation for not only Javanese women but the native people in general. Tuan Besar Kuasa, also known as “Plikemboh,” orders Sastro to give him Surati so she can become his mistress. The only reason he wants to have her is because she is a beautiful virgin. The very idea that he wants to “have” her shows the position of women in this society as women are objectified throughout the entire novel. Even if Surati had refused to go to Tuan Besar Kuasa, she knew it would make no difference. She was to be obedient to her father.

However, she does take matters into her own hands as she contracts smallpox for the expressed purposed of infecting Tuan Besar Kuasa, trying to kill herself and him. However, only Tuan Besar Kuasa dies. But Surati’s story does not only show the plight of native women, but also of natives as a whole, as Tuan Besar Kuasa takes advantage of his position over Sastro Kassier. Kuasa steals money from Sastro’s cashbox at work and then threatens to ruin him if he cannot produce the money. However, he says he will pay the debt in exchange for Surati.

It is made obvious colonialism has made the people's status as Natives defines their role in society, and as such some as forced to yield to the wishes of those in authority over them, whether that person be their father or their manager. It is understood that, " *in a case like this where two people are accused, one a Pure-blood manager...and the other is a Native, the Native is in the wrong place and the Pure is in the right* (Toer 143). This incident alone is sufficient in pinpointing the stratification of the Indonesian society which directly lead to subjugation of their women due to colonial law and order.

Annelies is perhaps a meek character apt to be categorized as the Silent One. Colonialism has stripped off her rights to speak and decide for her own being by imposing laws in favour to the colonial masters. Minke falls in love with Annelies, whom he eventually marries according to his native customs. However, because of the family dispute over Mellema's inheritance, Annelies had to annul her marriage to Minke by the order of the Dutch colonial court. At the end of the novel, Annelies is forced to leave her mother and her husband Minke, and go to the Netherlands to live with her legal guardian, despite all the efforts made by Nyai Oentoseroeh and Minke to resist the decision of the Dutch courts. An important point to note is that although Annelies has already died by the second chapter (another distinct style of writing by Pramoedya), she is often mentioned throughout the story. For other female characters in the novel, their resistance towards the colonial masters are apparent while in Annelies' case is vague. Ideologies and the implementation of the colonial law has somewhat made Annelies appears to be docile and submissive.

The strength and love of family are apparent throughout the novel; particularly in the beginning as Minke and Nyai become closer with the death of Annelies. During the rest of the novel, Nyai constantly supports Minke's actions and mentors Minke on life lessons. Due to imperialism that forced the country to poor social security and government support, the values of family are emphasized during this time period of Indonesia. In the various aspects of life, family places a great importance throughout this novel. Nyai treats Minke as her own child, and she sees him more of her son than she sees Robert. Nyai tries her best to bring the most out of Minke by teaching him and lecturing him. She says to Minke, "Child, you are all I have left in the world now. I am alone in the world now," and she knows how empty it is to feel without Minke around her. Nyai understands that if Minke leaves her, she will have no one else to live for.

In the novel, we see both sides of women's rights: the empowered, independent women and the oppressed, ill-treated women in three distinct categories; The Loud One, The Silent One and The Muted One. After her father's death, Annelies is taken from her family due to her lack of rights in the Netherlands. Also we see Surati daughter of Sastro Kassier have to be Tuan Besar Kuasa's concubine against her will. Nyai on the other hand, is a wise and insightful woman and runs her business with minimal help from Minke. Throughout the novel, women are shown to be competent, intelligent, and fully capable. Unfortunately these women are objectified and are seen as nothing but playthings for many men in the story. This treatment of women was regarded as normal, although there were still outcries of unfairness and disgust.

II. Conclusion

In a nutshell, this paper has chartered new terrains in literary studies by looking at the representations of women and correlating them to the impacts of colonialism, Dutch in particular. This paper has attempted to advocate the observation of women in literary discussion. Also, this paper reveals that women are represented in the novel as suppressed and dominated by men through marriage, attire, motherhood and other domains. A resultant from marriage is motherhood which inevitably leads to domestic responsibilities such as providing food. In addition, women are represented as victims of male aggression in which they become the recipients of violent acts such as forced marriage system, concubine system and verbal abuse.

Yet, one important point to take note is that viewing women solely as victims of patriarchal aggression will result in the projection of monolithic images of women-as-victims. Pramoedya has brilliantly attempted to defy the norm by presenting strong female characters such as Nyai Ontosoroh and Surati. This paper has tried to pinpoint that women can concurrently be strong, powerful and decisive. They are not always the passive victims for they can be initiators, decision-makers or controllers of men and their circumstances. Finally, this paper also recommends that further studies are justified so as to add more knowledge to feminist studies which will be a means of empowering women and contesting patriarchal suppression.

Works Cited

- [1] Ashcroft, B., G. Griffith and H. Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- [2] Hartadi, Yohanes. "The Colonial Doubling, or the Challenge for Colonial Authority." *Kritika Kultura* (2009): 145-158. Liukkonen, Petri. "Pramoedya Ananta Toer." *Books and Writers*. 2008. Ari Pesonen, Kuusankosken, Web. 19 Sep 2009. <<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/pram.htm>>.
- [3] "Pramoedya Ananta Toer Biography." *Notable Biographies*. 2008. The Gale Group, Inc., Web. 19 Sep 2009. <<http://www.notablebiographies.com/supp/Supplement-Sp-Z/Toer-Pramoedya-Ananta.html>>.
- [4] Toer, Pramoedya Ananta. *Child of All Nations*. New York, NY, USA: Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1996. Print. Schultz, Daniel F. and Maryanne Felter. "Education, History, and Nationalism In Pramoedya Toer's 'Buru Quartet'." *An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (2002): 143-175.