

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

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-

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 and *Larasati* (1960) are cited as texts that prove the limitations of an essentialist category and/or identity such as Third World W

Gadis Pantai (1962)

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

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 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 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

1975, for example, is a case in point, until Indonesia finally agreed in 1999 to let the East Timorese vote 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

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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 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 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, t -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

-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 , 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 puts marginalization back to the center of power.

Struggle for Resistance

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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-

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

t 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.

to take her newb

house.

wriggled to
get up from his rocking chair. He stood up to look at Gadis Pantai who wore her head

Rebuke me, Bendoro. But an infant is not jewelry, not a ring,

e to flee with

the child then

head

the

inging his cane.

Like a platoon of soldiers the male and female servants tried to stop and ambushed Gadis

away a servant but the rest come to squeeze

e Bendoro scolded her.

infant right away

my own possession. A baby. The baby I myself delivered to this world. She is my child;

For Pramoedya, for example, no knowledge has mo
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*

-sufficient heroes

(Hellwig1994: 82 95). It appears that there is continuity of the presence of role-model female

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* *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 Sadjja [Just Call me Kartini]* (1962), thus revealing
this writer-

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]

inator [konseptor], or someone from the

(Toer 1962: xii). In my interview with him on 18 September 2002, for example, Pramoedya
reiterated his admiration of Ka
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. Lara

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

Especially in *Gadis Pantai*, beside the mother figure, also included in the picture of resourceful women is the sympathetic servant

petitor 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

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

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Biodata

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