

SUBALTERN VOICES AND COLONIAL DESIRE: RECLAIMING THE NYAI'S AGENCY IN INDONESIAN COLONIAL LITERATURE

(Suara-suara Subaltern dan Hasrat Kolonial: Merebut Kembali Agensi Nyai dalam Sastra Kolonial Indonesia)

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Abstract: *This study examines the Nyai—a concubine figure situated at the intersection of colonial power, patriarchy, and racial hybridity—in Indonesian colonial literature. It offers a paired reading of Nyai Ontosoroh in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Bumi Manusia and Nyi Sadikem in Artie Ahmad's recent novel Nyi Sadikem (Marjin Kiri), arguing that both texts reposition the Nyai from a stigmatized object of colonial desire to a speaking subject who negotiates agency within constraining structures. Applying postcolonial theory (Bhabha's hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence; Said's Orientalism), the analysis focuses on Nyai Ontosoroh's struggle to be literate, and building the capability to manage her husband's business, and Nyi Sadikem's struggle to survive, which is rooted in vernacular memory and the "gowok" tradition—through embodied knowledge and community ties. Those two novels articulated the politics of resistance and intimacy in colonial eras. By focusing on Nyai, the current study contributes to decolonial feminist reading, especially highlighting subalternity, colonial intimacy, and educational implications, all of which are an effort to reclaim marginalized women as historical and cultural agents.*

Keywords: *Colonial Desire; Marginalized Women; Nyai Ontosoroh; Nyi Sadikem; Women Voice*

A. INTRODUCTION

Nyai is the primary focus of colonial intimacy in Indonesia. She is the figure of the target of racial and gender discrimination. Her working force, sexuality, and maternal authority highly supported the colonial household, but her voice was marginalized. The novel, Bumi Manusia by Pramoedya has led Nyai Ontosoroh as the resistance figure of proto-feminism. In the contemporary literary work, the novel Nyi Sadikem (2024, Marjin Kiri), written by Artie Ahmad, presented Nyai through the modern lens, presenting the literary imagination with the traditional practice of "gowok." Reading and analyzing these literary works play a crucial role in defining the agency of women within the colonial era context. An agency plays a vital role in articulating the legal-rational basis and in surviving within the community.

Contemporary studies on Nyai focus on her resistance (Nyai Ontosoroh) through several approaches. The studies on the film adaptation shed light on feminist agency in the face of colonial law. Many literary criticism studies focus on her struggle as a Javanese socialist feminist. Other studies focus on educational aspects, highlighting Bumi Manusia under the debates on colonial education and nationalism. Those studies portray Nyai Ontosoroh as a subaltern woman who speaks frequently, mobilizes literacy, and possesses business skills. Her authority as a mother is optimized to resist the regime of racial and legal.

There have been numerous studies on Nyai Ontosoroh, particularly in the context of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Bumi Manusia* (Earth of Mankind). Ramli dan Abdul Aziz (2013) focused on Ontosoroh by applying the concept of Gayatri Spivak's Subaltern. Ramli and Aziz argue that even though Ontosoroh has literacy and business skills, which she could use to fight against the colonial and patriarchal system, her agency was limited by structural power. The other study, Murti (2020), identified the feminist ideology in *Bumi Manusia*, describing Ontosoroh as representing the proto-feminist consciousness in Indonesian literature. She transformed from the object of colonial desire into the subject of resistance. Arifudin (2019) highlighted the study on Ontosoroh through the lens of Ontosoroh resistance against the colonial legal system, employing her business skills and authority as a mother, all of which define empowerment. Once again, Nyai is framed as the icon of feminism, rather than a stigmatized concubine, reflecting the power dynamics of concubinage (Rahayu et al., 2014). All of the studies mentioned above present Nyai Ontosoroh as the active subject, articulating and mobilizing the limited resources she owned to show a model of subaltern resistance.

The previous studies highlight the figure of Nyai Ontosoroh that has been the most studied Nyai. The contemporary studies have been wide-ranging across the canon text. Mukti et al. (2023) studied the short stories that present the figure of Nyai, and found that Nyai's identity was socially constructed through the intersection of colonial gender, race, class, and social hierarchy. Mukti's study shows that the figures of nyai did not only represent themselves as victims of oppression. Instead, they also represent the figures of symbolic resistance or hidden resistance, such as skillful work, collective solidarity, and strategic loyalty. Through the intersectional feminist approach, the analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of Nyai, which is not a static category. Instead, it is dynamic and has a potential strategy to survive.

This study aims to extend existing discussions on the position of the nyai within the colonial context by broadening the analytical frame to include Artie Ahmad's recent work *Nyi Sadikem*. Through the discussion of both literary works, the present study aims to focus on the experiences of marginalized women, but who, in fact, possessed the capacity to enact significant forms of resistance and effect meaningful social transformation. By highlighting the contributions of these marginalized women, it is expected to be able to enrich the discussion of the marginalized groups that often overlooked roles in shaping their communities.

To examine Nyai Ontosoroh and Nyai Sadikem, this study employs Spivak's concept of the Subaltern voice, Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, and Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, ambivalence, and mimicry. The theoretical frameworks enable us to explore more deeply into the forms of agency and resistance by the *nyai*, presentallowing for a nuanced understanding of how indigenous women negotiated their interactions with both indigenous men and white Dutch men who wielded social, political, and economic power. Subaltern, in Spivak's views, is the important tool for analyzing feminism, which advocate non Western feminism. Spivak's feminist perspective offers a lens that highlights the

struggle and resistance of women in the South. The concept of Said's Orientalism focuses on the notion of how colonial discourse constructed the *nyai* as the racialized and sexualized Other, thereby shaping the limits of their social positioning while also highlighting the discursive spaces they could contest. On the other hand, Bhabha's concept of hybridity, ambivalence, and mimicry unravel how the marginalized women inhabited the in-between spaces of colonial culture. In addition it also spotlights of how the women strategically adopt and reconfigure the elements of colonial modernity to resist, subvert, and renegotiate the power relations imposed on them. Together, these theories illuminate the complex, multilayered ways in which the *nyai* exercised agency—often subtly yet effectively—within an oppressive colonial-patriarchal order.

Edward Said's concept of Orientalism offers a robust analytical framework for understanding how colonial discourse constructs and fixes the identity of the colonized as the "Other." The concept of Orientalism states that the "East" culture and society is produced through Western narratives and perspectives as irrational, inferior, emotional, passive, exotic, and inherently subordinate traits that justify domination. The thought of inferior East is not merely descriptive; it is productive, shaping how colonized subjects are perceived and how they are allowed to exist within colonial social and legal systems. Orientalism emphasizes that these representations are structured and institutionalized, embedded in law, bureaucracy, literature, and everyday interactions of colonialism. Such a framework is particularly relevant for examining gendered and racialized subjects, because Orientalism often frames colonized women as doubly othered: both non-European and female, and therefore even easier for colonial power to objectify and control.

In analysing the position of a Nyai in the Dutch East Indies, Orientalism offers the conceptual tools to understand how colonial structures define indigenous women through racialized and sexualized stereotypes. The discourse of Nyai mostly constructed as the figures of morally ambiguous, hypersexual, uncivilized, and lacking legitimate social status. The liminal representations lead into the position of exclusion from rights and visibility in the context of formal colonial institutions. The concept of orientalism reveals that social and political positioning is not a matter of individual judgment. Instead, it is part of a larger ideological system that constructs indigenous women as marginal and controllable within the colonial order. This paper applies the Said's concept of Orientalism as a conceptual lens, to examine how the Nyai figure becomes a discursive category produced by colonial power rather than merely a social role, and how this category shapes the lived realities, constraints, and possibilities available to figures such as Nyai Ontosoroh.

The other postcolonial theory I applied in this study, is Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial concepts: such as hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence. Those concepts offer a theoretical lens for understanding how colonized subjects negotiate identity and power within oppressive structures. Hybridity implies that people's creation and behavior lies "in-between" cultural space where the colonized people combines, reinterprets, and

transforms elements of both indigenous and colonial cultures. The hybrid mode does not merely blend traditions; more importantly, it destabilizes colonial authority by demonstrating that identity is neither fixed nor fully controllable by the colonizer.

Bhabha's concept on hybridity defines the alternative of new subjectivities emerging within colonial domination—subjectivities that are neither completely subjugated nor fully aligned with colonial expectations. Hybridity means that, for example, a colonized woman may shape alternative ways of being, acting, and knowing although she faces many constraints. Mimicry means that people imitates the colonizer "almost the same, but not quite," which results in a resemblance that is simultaneously desired and feared by colonial authority. The imitation implies the colonial power limit. This shows that its cultural superiority is neither natural nor absolute. The last concept, Ambivalence, shows the tension within colonial discourse, which oscillates between admiration and anxiety, control and instability. The concepts provide a framework for analyzing the position of a colonized woman (Nyai) in a patriarchal structure by showing that even within subordinate position, there obviously exists a space for negotiation and subtle disruption. Bhabha's theory allows us to conceptualize how a figure like a Nyai can inhabit a marginal position while also exerting forms of agency that unsettle both colonial and patriarchal hierarchies.

By comparing *Nyai Ontosoroh* and *Nyi Sadikem*, the current paper poses the questions: (1) How do the texts construct the *Nyai's* voice and agency amid colonial and patriarchal constraints? (2) What forms of resistance—legal-discursive, domestic-economic, embodied-ritual—are represented in each narrative?

The current analysis projects that Nyai Ontosoroh and Nyi Sadikem presented the subaltern agency that complements each other. Nyai Ontosoroh amplifies strategic mimicry by applying colonial literacy, legality, and her business skills to make a claim that the authority can hear. On the other hand, Nyi Sadikem prioritizes her survival strategy, a vernacular life, applying traditional knowledge to sustain herself. Both of them changed the analysis of Nyai from a symbol of moral panic to a symbol of emancipation.

B. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in critical literary analysis. It aims to interrogate the construction, and representation of the *Nyai* figure in Indonesian colonial and postcolonial literature. By situating the *Nyai* within intersecting frameworks of gender, race, class, and colonial power, this method highlights the narrative strategies and cultural meanings embedded in literary texts.

The qualitative approach is chosen because it allows for a nuanced and interpretive reading of literary texts (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N., 2018). Critical literary studies prioritize close textual analysis, intertextuality, and theoretical engagement with broader socio-historical contexts (Eagleton, T., 2008; Tyson, L., 2015). This approach enables the

researcher to move beyond surface-level description to uncover the cultural, ideological, and political dimensions of the *Nyai* in Indonesian literature.

The material objects of this study are two literary texts representing different temporal and cultural engagements with the *Nyai* figure:

- a. *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth of Mankind) by Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1980), which introduces Nyai Ontosoroh as a resistant and articulate subaltern within colonial society.
- b. *Nyi Sadikem* by Artie Ahmad (2024), a contemporary novel that reimagines the *Nyai* through vernacular memory and indigenous storytelling traditions, revisiting the cultural archive of the *gowok* and concubinage practices in Java.

This study is informed by two primary theoretical frameworks. First, Postcolonial Feminism, drawing on Gayatri Spivak's *Can subaltern speak*, this framework critiques both Western feminist universalism and indigenous patriarchy, situating the *Nyai* as a figure doubly marginalized. Postcolonial feminism is particularly useful for interrogating the silences, agency, and ambivalent roles of women in colonial/postcolonial settings (Spivak, G.C., 1994; Loomba, A.2015; Mohanty, CT., 2003).

Second, Bhabha's Concept of Hybridity. From Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), the concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence are applied to the *Nyai* figures. Nyai Ontosoroh's adoption of Dutch language, education, and legal discourse, and Nyi Sadikem's embeddedness in oral tradition, both exemplify hybrid subjectivities (Young, R.J.C, 2001; Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H., 2013). This theoretical lens illuminates how the *Nyai* simultaneously resists and negotiates colonial power (Rahayu, 2021).

The analysis proceeds through close reading of the two novels, focusing on (a) Narrative voice and silence: how the texts allow or constrain the *Nyai*'s ability to speak. (b) Agency and resistance: how legal, economic, maternal, and cultural strategies are represented in the texts.

These dimensions are read in light of postcolonial feminist critique and Bhabha's hybridity to trace both convergences and divergences in the articulation of Nyai Ontosoroh and Nyi Sadikem.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Nyai's Voice and Silence amid Colonial and Patriarchal Constraints

In *Bumi Manusia*, Nyai Ontosoroh is initially positioned within the stereotype of the concubine—silenced, commodified, and dependent on her European master. Nyai Ontosoroh, born Sanikem, initially possesses no voice and holds little power when, at the age of thirteen, she is sold by her father to a Dutch man, Mr. Mellema. The young

Sanikem, feels regretful to her father deep in her heart, expresses a quiet but determined resistance. The young daughter refuses to accept the role that has been imposed upon her. She shows her resistance not only toward her father's action of selling her to Mr Millema, but also toward the practice of commodifying human beings for financial gain and personal profit. When she becomes Nyai Ontosoroh, she strengthens her resistance by rejecting her father's later attempts to visit her. Her action indicates that she defies the culturally entrenched expectation of obedience of a daughter to her parents, a norm that exists in society. For her, a father who has surrendered his child for profit forfeits the moral authority to demand devotion. In asserting this stance, Nyai Ontosoroh begins to articulate a voice that challenges both patriarchal norms and the structures of oppression that enable such violations.

In this novel, Pramoedya writes her gradual transformation into a speaking subject, foregrounding her intellectual self-education, legal awareness, and ability to assert authority over her household and daughter. Her voice challenges both Dutch legal frameworks and Javanese patriarchal expectations, suggesting that the colonial household can be destabilized from within (Ramli & Abdul Aziz, 2013). Through the strategy of mimicry Nyai Ontosoroh becomes voiced powerfully. The mimicry enables her to appropriate the cultural tools of the Dutch colonizer while subtly subverting the authority that those tools are meant to uphold. She has the mastery of administrative procedures and business practices. She is also fluent in Dutch legal terminology, all of which shows the form of mimicry that is "almost the same but not quite." She is able to obtain the competencies of colonial modernity that grants her competence and authority. She manages to do the mimicry because of her strong commitment to self-education. She is famous with her statement, "*Aku belajar!*" ("I learned!"), which underscores her refusal to remain in the epistemic position prescribed for indigenous women. Through autodidactic study, she builds intellectual capital that elevates her beyond the stereotypical image of the uneducated *nyai*, enabling her to challenge the structures that seek to silence her. By her competencies and power, Nyai Ontosoroh shows her identity and strong agency. She is able to speak Dutch, she learn and understand Dutch laws and system, so that she is able to do resistance.

Nyai Ontosoroh's voice works not only in the business administrative, but also, the more importantly, in the area of legal consciousness and maternal authority. The area has become an important tools vehicle for asserting moral and emotional legitimacy within an unjust colonial order.

In the court, when she has to face the custody battle over Annelies, Nyai Ontosoroh presented herself as a person with a strong awareness and understanding of the racial and gender biases of the law. The colonial legal system denies to acknowledge her personhood, yet she still confronts it with clarity and resolve, insisting on her rights as a mother and as a capable guardian. The legal issues that Nyai Ontosoroh has faced, changes her from a marginalized subject into a strong critic of colonial hypocrisy. Moreover, her maternal authority—expressed through her nurturing of Annelies and her

mentorship of Minke—demonstrates how caregiving becomes a site of resistance rather than submission. She also strongly educates her daughter, Annelies into a rational, educated young woman. The mother's nurture and education reflects the strong ethics and at the same time shows her protective and political narrative of an indigenous mother. This narrative contested to colonial narratives that deny indigenous women the capacity for moral and intellectual leadership. Together, these dimensions of Nyai Ontosoroh's voice reveal a complex, articulate, and strategic agency that challenges the colonial-patriarchal structures seeking to contain her.

On the other hand, Artie Ahmad's Nyi Sadikem articulates her voice after experiencing a series of traumatic displacements, beginning with her expulsion from her own family. Born Elisabeth to Issaak van Kirk, a Dutch father, and an indigenous concubine, she is cast into a river during adolescence and presumed dead by her kin. Rescued by a midwife who renames her Moerni, she tries to learn the knowledge and skills of midwifery before the woman's death forces her into a precarious life as an entertainer for men. Over time, Moerni amasses enough resources to build a substantial house and ultimately reinvents herself as a *gowok* under the name Nyi Sadikem, mentoring young girls through a strict set of rules designed to guide them toward professional and economic survival. The Artie Ahmad's novel reveals that becoming a *gowok*, Nyi Sadikem shapes the pathways for girls who might otherwise have gloomy and dark lives because of being sold by impoverished fathers. Nyi sadikem provides a form of protection, livelihood, and dignity. In this role, she constructs a form of power grounded in social knowledge, economic autonomy, and intimate awareness of the political and patriarchal networks that shape her environment.

Becoming a *gowok* is the role through which Nyi Sadikem acquires power, as it positions her to instruct and guide young men prior to marriage. As the narrative notes, "Mbok Emprit filled me with every detail about what it meant to be a *gowok*—how I should treat young bachelors preparing to leave their celibate years behind, as well as inexperienced youths on the threshold of adolescence and adulthood." Through the instructional role, Nyi Sadikem not only attains authority within her community but also obtains influence and power over the socialization of young men, thereby participating in the shaping of local moral and sexual norms.

2. Nyai's Agency and Resistance

Agency for Nyai Ontosoroh can be seen within the fraught terrain described by Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern, highlighting how a doubly marginalized subject—colonized and female—speaks and acts from a position that colonial discourse attempts to silence. As a *nyai*, she is produced through what Edward Said identifies as Orientalist discourse, which frames indigenous women as hypersexual, inferior, and incapable of rational agency. However, in Pram's Nyai Ontosoroh resists the discursive construction of a Nyai. She did that through self-education, managerial competence, and moral authority. She said, "*Aku belajar!*" and this statement has become an assertion of

epistemic agency. What she wants to express is that she refuses to be a person that is chained within the colonial script of ignorance imposed on her. Her ability to run the Mellema estate more effectively than its European owner challenges the Orientalist assumption of native incapacity. Despite the legal system denying her status—as seen in the custody trial of Annelies—Nyai Ontosoroh articulates a powerful critique of colonial injustice, illustrating how the subaltern can, at moments, “speak” through acts of resistance even when institutional structures refuse to hear her.

Homi K. Bhabha’s concepts of mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity further illuminate the subtle operations of Nyai Ontosoroh’s resistance. She is very good at Dutch business and administrative practices. She also represents herself as understanding the legal reasoning, all of which exemplifies strategic mimicry. It is called mimicry because she adopts the colonizer’s language and forms of knowledge “almost the same but not quite,” using them to expose colonial contradictions—for example, her eloquent legal arguments that unsettle Dutch officials during the custody case. The hybridity of Nyai Ontosoroh can be seen from her position within the colonial household. In the house, she poses herself in-between cultural space where she blends indigenous values with European modernity. She strongly believes in what and how the indigenous people should do to build dignity and freedom, but she also adopts Western’s discipline in doing business. The hybrid identity, in consequence, destabilizes the colonizer’s authority. She is rational and modern in her attitude and decision, and in raising Annelies shows the hybrid agency. The colonial response to her competence reveals ambivalence: European authorities simultaneously rely on her abilities yet refuse to acknowledge her personhood. This ambivalence, in fact, reveals the weakness and instability of colonial power. Because of her ability to understand the system and strongly builds her identity, Nyai Ontosoroh becomes a person who shows resistance. She is challenging the racial, gendered, and institutional hierarchies through the very practices that the colonial system sought to deny her.

Nyi Sadikem’s agency is deeply shaped by her position as a subaltern. Under the notion of Spivak’s concept of subaltern, Nyi Sadikem shows the intersecting layers of marginalization as a mixed-race daughter of a Dutch man and an indigenous concubine. At her young age, Elizabeth suffered from abandonment, violence, and social erasure. Elizabeth or Moerni, and her mother are the cast women, according to the concept of Orientalism. The cast women are those who are morally fallen, racially impure, and expendable within both colonial and indigenous patriarchal structures. The understanding of the violence and suffering happened to herself and moreover to her late mother, haunts Nyi Sadikem throughout her life, as she continually recalls her mother’s poverty, humiliation, and eventual suicide. Because of the bitter life, Nyi Sadikem learns how to resist the passive position. Nyi Sadikem, after a long struggle of building her identity, she builds and reconstructs herself through the acts of self-determination. Her choice to become a *gowok* is not an acceptance of a stigmatized role but a reclamation of agency within a society that had denied her belonging. She accepts clients selectively, imposes strict rules, and insists on professional boundaries—resisting both colonial constructions

of the indigenous woman as sexually available and indigenous patriarchal assumptions that women in such professions are powerless.

Within this context, Bhabha's notion of mimicry helps illuminate how Nyi Sadikem subverts patriarchal and colonial power from within. The role of *gowok* traditionally serves male desire and social ritual. However, Nyi Sadikem does not only conform the social norms. She plays her agency by reconfiguring the practice of *gowok* as a disciplined, structured profession governed by her own principles. She is doing the strategic mimicry, in the sense of performing the expected role while altering its meaning. Setting her own rules in doing the practice of *gowok*, she undermines the attempts that try to subordinate her. Moreover, she cultivates economic independence and social capital by establishing connections with wealthy and influential male clients, reversing the expected direction of dependence. She is able to refuse arbitrary male authority, alongside her careful selection of clients, demonstrates her ability to reshape the contours of a role designed to exploit her. In doing so, she reveals the instability, or ambivalence, within the local patriarchal order, which both relies on her expertise and is unsettled by the autonomy and influence she accumulates.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity further clarifies the transformative power of Nyi Sadikem's agency. By mentoring young women—her *cantrik*—she constructs a hybrid cultural space where traditional female knowledge, bodily discipline, emotional awareness, and professional ethics intersect to produce new possibilities for women who might otherwise be sold into marriage or sex work by impoverished families. The hybrid space shows her resistance of the colonizer's narratives through presenting indigenous women not as passive victims but as subjects capable of self-fashioning and collective empowerment. Nyi Sadikem also builds her economic networks and intimate understanding of the region's male-dominated political structures. Not only the intimate relationship, she also builds a strategic awareness that enables her to navigate and influence local power dynamics. As a single, marginalized woman, she crafts her resistance, neither overtly confrontational nor publicly political; it is enacted through the everyday, relational, and institutional strategies that allow her to carve out autonomy and reshape the social conditions of other marginalized women.

3. Comparative analysis of Nyai Ontosoroh and Nyi sadikem

Both Nyai Ontosoroh and Nyi Sadikem emerge as powerful agencies of subaltern women who refuse the many layers of oppressions of colonialism and patriarchy. They do so through distinct pathways shaped by their social origins and the cultural landscapes they inhabit. Under the notions of Said's Orientalism, both figures fight against racialized and gendered discourses that seek to inscribe indigenous and mixed-race women as morally suspect, intellectually inferior, and socially disposable. Nyai Ontosoroh resists this construction by cultivating an intellectual and moral authority that contradicts the colonial figure of the irrational *nyai*. She has self-education, administrative expertise, and assertive maternal voice, all of which is able to destabilize the very stereotypes used to marginalize

her. Meanwhile, Nyi Sadikem's resistance emerges through the reconstruction of a stigmatized identity. Moerni, as the mixed-race daughter of a Dutch man and an indigenous concubine mother, negotiates the haunting legacy of her mother's degradation and suicide. Her mother's story is a story deeply shaped by Orientalist hierarchies of race, sexuality, and worth. Moerni's transformation into a disciplined and selective *gowok* is a vital action of reconfiguration, reclaiming dignity and professional agency in a space structured to exploit women like her.

The insights of Homi K. Bhabha further highlights the agencies performed by the two Nyais. Nyai Ontosoroh's fluent of Dutch legal discourse and administrative culture shows the strategy of mimicry—she performs the knowledge of the colonizer “almost the same but not quite,” thereby unsettling colonial certainty and revealing the instability of its authority. Through the Bhabha's concept, Nyai Ontosoroh's becomes a form of hybridity, combining indigenous resilience with European rationality to produce a subjectivity that refuses colonial categorization. The hybridity generates ambivalence among colonial officials, who rely on her competence yet refuse to recognize her as a legal person, the same as the Dutch people. Nyi Sadikem, also applies strategic mimicry by performing the role of a *gowok* while simultaneously redefining its moral and professional parameters. Her selective acceptance of clients and strict codes of conduct create a hybrid space that merges bodily knowledge, emotional intelligence, and ethical discipline—transforming a stigmatized practice into a site of female agency. She develops the capabilities in navigating the networks of elite male clients, which reveals how mimicry and ambivalence operate within local patriarchal structures: men depend on her services yet remain unsettled by her autonomy and insight into regional power dynamics.

Spivak's concept of subaltern highlights the critical significance of marginalized women's voices. Nyai Ontosoroh has several strategies of resistance, that build her voice in resisting the institutions that deny her personhood. Her interventions in the custody trial of Annelies reveal a subaltern voice that, while structurally unheard within colonial law, articulates a moral resistance that exposes the violence embedded in colonial justice. Nyi Sadikem as subaltern voice works through everyday, relational strategies rather than formal political confrontation. By training young *cantrik*, she cultivates collective empowerment among women who would otherwise be vulnerable to exploitation or commodification. She makes her house as a school for young girls who wants to learn and get her mentorship. The building of a house of 'gowok' brings about as a disruption of patriarchal economic networks, and creates alternative life trajectories for marginalized girls. Nyi Sadikem's decision and action illustrate subaltern resistance that often manifests through the quiet construction of new social possibilities rather than through overt rebellion.

Both Nyai women define the agency that they perform in colonial settings which is neither singular nor absolute. Instead, the agency emerges through context-specific negotiations of power, identity, and knowledge. Nyai Ontosoroh's power lies on her intellectual mastery, legal critique, and maternal authority. The power posits her in the confrontation

with Dutch institutional power. The ability to navigate and reshape local patriarchal networks, transforming Nyi Sadikem's vulnerable position into one of economic and social leverage. Nyi Sadikem is not only survive as a gowok, but she thrives, and doing resistance against the male patriarchal society in a soft, cultural ways (Rahayu, 2017). The figures of Nyai discussed above reveal the multiplicity of subaltern strategies that women may apply to strengthen the resistance against the dominant structures that seek to silence them. The narratives of the marginalized yet powerful women complicate the dominant historiographies of the colonial period. Through foregrounding, the creative, moral, and intellectual labor through which marginalized women carved out spaces of autonomy and redefined the possibilities of female agency.

D. CONCLUSION

The analysis of those two literary works by focusing on the existence of Nyai, *Bumi Manusia* (Pramoedya Ananta Toer, 1980) and *Nyi Sadikem* (Artie Ahmad, 2024), give us a clear construct of women's voice, agency and resistance. Applying postcolonial feminist and Bhabha's hybridity, the analysis concludes that Nyai is not a merely a passive victim of colonial power and patriarchal society. Instead, Nyai is an active subject able to decide her fate although bordered by some constraints. Nyai Ontosoroh applies colonial tools (she learnt and use the tools) against the Dutch colonial. Nyai Sadikem used her ability and authority in ritual practice of gowok, the oral tradition and traditional epistemics to enforce her power. The varied exercise of power among the Nyai shows that the voice and power of the Nyai emerges in many discourse, legal discourse to vernacular discourse.

The findings show that the women's resistance is outstanding in the story of Nyai. The resistance is different but works each other. Nyai Ontosoroh applies legal-discursive and domestic-economic resistance, that worked under colonial capitalist systems. Nyi Sadikem applies embodied-ritual resistance, preserving indigenous epistemologies of "gowok" and ensuring cultural survival outside colonial archives. Those resistance shows that subaltern resistance is varied, depending on the context.

In sum, the narratives of *Nyai* should be interpreted not only as a colonial stereotype but as an emancipatory cultural symbol. In Indonesian literary context, this implies that it is necessary to review the canon to include both nationalist texts like *Bumi Manusia* and contemporary vernacular imagination like *Nyi Sadikem*. For education purpose, it calls for a decolonial curriculum that values traditions, indigenous epistemologies, and marginalized voices alongside canonical works.

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