

# **NYAI IN PATRIARCHAL AND COLONIAL SOCIETY: A SUBALTERN STUDY OF NYAI ONTOSOROH IN PRAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER'S *BUMI MANUSIA***

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## **Abstract**

The practice of *nyai* began in Indonesia in the 17th century when the Dutch colonizers began strengthening their foothold there. A *nyai* is none other than a concubine or a mistress to a foreigner, especially a European. The *nyai* were a group of women who were exploited during the Dutch occupation. To what extent was a *nyai* merely a sexual object to colonizers, and is associated with the use of force which was prevalent in the patriarchal Javanese society? Did the *nyai* voice their rights? Did the authorities care about their hardship? This essay shall analyse these issues using the approach of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern studies, which puts forward the concept of subaltern women as oppressed women without a voice. Although others could voice the problems on their behalf, this is not the voice of subaltern women themselves as the party that voices out their problems may have other interests. This analysis is of subaltern women in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *This Earth of Mankind (Bumi Manusia)*. This study confirms that Nyai Ontosoroh is a subaltern woman in two types of society, i.e. patriarchal and colonial society. She is manipulated for the interests of men and for colonizers. Nyai Ontosoroh can be taken to be an example of the exploitation of women in a patriarchal society. Nyai Ontosoroh herself attempts to voice

out her rights as a daughter and a mother. Patriarchal and colonial groups continually deny subaltern women like Nyai Ontosoroh their rights.

Keywords: subaltern women, patriarchy, *nyai*, colonialism

## INTRODUCTION

Because society is hierarchical in nature, there are bound to be an upper and a lower stratum. Those in the lower stratum are marginalized in many ways, as compared to the powerful upper stratum. This fact is obvious in patriarchal and colonial societies. Those who were colonized are also marginalized by colonizers, while the women are edged out by the men. This means that the burden that women shoulder is doubled in patriarchal and colonial societies.

When the issue of marginalized people is put forward, the question of power becomes central, especially when power is also closely associated with men and colonizers. This power results in the denial of rights of the subjugated, especially those of women. Women were usually oppressed, exploited and shunned in politics, society and the economy. Their struggles are ignored. With such power, men and colonizers often dominate over women. Various methods were employed by men and colonizers to marginalize women. How did the marginalized women react to this situation? Was their voice heard and did they have any effect in protecting their rights? In this study, the novel *This Earth of Mankind (Bumi Manusia)* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer is studied using the feminist theory of subaltern studies which was popularised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988a). This subaltern study is seen as very relevant in uncovering the issue of marginalized women whether by men in a patriarchal society or colonizers under the colonial authority; in the case of this novel, it is the *nyai*.

## GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK AND FEMINIST STUDIES

The approach used shall be based on the views of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian-born woman who now resides and teaches in the United States of America. Spivak is a scholar who is inclined towards feminism and postcolonialism. Her criticisms on First World Feminism, particularly French feminism, which made generalizations about Third World Women using Western feminist theory without taking into consideration on local problems such as history, social and politics of the women in question, is contained in her writings, such as her article entitled "French Feminism

in an International Frame” (1985). In this article, Spivak mentions that clitoridectomy as practised by Sudanese and Egyptian women is seen by Western feminists as a denial of women’s sexuality because they apply the framework of Western thought such as those of Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous. They state that the “female body” is more important in the context of looking for women’s identities. However, according to Spivak, clitoridectomy is associated with the ideological and material repression of women when put in the correct historical, political and social context: “At the end of spectrum, it is this ideological-material repression of the clitoris as the signifier of the sexed subject that operates the specific oppression of women...” (Spivak, 1988b: 152-153). Spivak asserts that Third World Women cannot be viewed from the narrow and single perspective of a different thought and culture, otherwise Third World Women will be silenced. In other words, to Spivak, Third World Women require their own channel and are not to be represented by others when it comes to voicing out their problems.

## **THE SUBALTERN**

Spivak also widened the meaning of “subaltern” by considering women as subaltern no matter whether they are at the lower or middle stratum. “Subaltern” is a term that was used by Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist thinker from Italy. He used the terms “subaltern” and “subordinate” alternately with reference to an unorganized group of rural peasants in southern Italy who were at an inferior level as a result of the hegemony of the ruling class. They were a group of people comprising peasants, workers and other groups who were denied entry into a higher or a more dominant level. Then, in the 1980s, a group of scholars originating from India appropriated this term and developed a field of study known as Subaltern Studies.

## **WOMEN AS A SUBALTERN GROUP**

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discussed women as a subaltern group in an essay entitled, “Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow-Sacrifice” in the journal *Wedge* in 1985. In this well-known essay, Spivak discusses whether or not a marginalized and colonized group has any say whatsoever. Spivak talks about Western discourse which supposedly represents issues of the third world. Her opinion was that a marginalized group had no voice if a different channel is used, such as intellectuals, because of the ideological

implications. This also applies to women who are deemed as subaltern or marginalized. To Spivak, subaltern women are not limited to those in the lower or upper stratum. A patriarchal society allows men to exert dominance over women, and this dominance is accepted by women. Similarly, colonization permitted colonizers to exercise their power over the colonized people, men or women, through a kind of mindset that claimed that the colonizers were more powerful and superior in all aspects.

The dominance of men and colonizers over women resulted from the gap between them. This difference caused women to be denied of their rights because of men's egotism, and the power of the colonizers, who were thought to be more superior in all aspects compared to women. Women's voices were silenced in a world controlled by men and the colonizers who exploited and marginalized women, and prevented them from determining their own destiny. Therefore, this subaltern group of women was forced to devise various strategies so that their voices did not remain silenced due to the dominance of men and the authority of colonizers.

Spivak doubts that subaltern women have any say because the channels which acted as their voice had a vested interest and did not sincerely address their problems. This is highlighted by her objection towards Michel Foucault's and Gilles Deleuze's views. In her well-known essay entitled "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985), Spivak rejects Foucault's and Deleuze's views which suggested among other things that intellectuals must understand and voice the discourse of "the Other" that constituted the repressed. She cited the example of the practice of suttee in India. Indian women were trapped in the institution of suttee, according to which, in Indian society, Hindu widows must immolate themselves on the funeral pyre of their dead husband. In the middle of the 19th century, while under the rule of the British, Governor General William Bentinck outlawed suttee and the act of outlawing suttee was deemed as "white men saving brown women from brown men." (Spivak 1988a:297). The patriarchal nationalists, however, believed that the women actually wanted to die in such a manner to achieve salvation and they considered such women as courageous. However, to Spivak these Indian women could not say anything or were silenced by colonizers' discourse, as well as the men who controlled the communal system, based on two dominant narratives which were the colonizers and Indian elite (Spivak 1988a: 298). In other words, Spivak's view was that subaltern women could not "speak" because they were represented by an established view of authority and intellectuals that was dominated by two powerful institutions: the British colonizers and

the Indian bourgeoisie. Therefore, in reality, she found women's say on suttee was silenced by the political representation of those in authority. In other words, to Spivak, subaltern women had no voice if such a voice is by way of a particular powerful medium.

## **SUBALTERN WOMEN AND CONCUBINES IN INDONESIA**

The practice of *nyai* began in Indonesia in the 17th century, during the rule of the Dutch who were then strengthening their colonial grip on Indonesia. Traditionally, women who were turned into *nyai* not only took care of households but also acted as concubines to their owners (Reggie Baay, 2010:1). According to *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (2007:789), the term *nyai* meant "concubine or mistress to a foreigner", namely the Europeans. At the same time, during Dutch rule, *nyai* were local women unofficially or illegally married to Dutch men. Although the practice of *nyai* was prevalent during colonial rule, it began much earlier when the power of men was particularly strong in the patriarchal society of Indonesia. The power that men had allowed them to determine the destiny of women.

Several factors existed as to the emergence of the practice of *nyai* in the Dutch colony, among which was the presence of Dutch bachelors, or those Dutch colonial officials who were married but did not bring their wives to the new colony, worsened by the dearth of Dutch women assigned to serve in the colony (Sugihastuti and Itsna Hadi Septiawan, 2007:107). Not all women became *nyai* by force. There were a small group of local women who chose to be *nyai* due to poverty. They wanted to get away from the shackles of such poverty and one alternative was to become a *nyai*, not only to the Europeans but also to the Chinese. However, there were also *nyai* who came from aristocratic families, in cases where a father handed over his daughter to the colonizers as he wanted to safeguard his status and position (Hayu Adi Darmarastri, 2007:5).

Apart from that, religious differences were an important factor in spreading the practice of *nyai* in Indonesia during the era of colonialism. This situation did not make it possible for local women to legally marry someone from a different religion, from the point of view of the local community (Ibnu Wahyudi, 2003:50). The situation was exploited by the Dutch to continue the practice of *nyai* among local women, as they would never under any circumstances abandon their Christian beliefs, which they regarded as the religion of the civilized.

What is evident is that the existence of the practice of *nyai* reduced the status and prestige of local women. Nyoman Kutha Ratna (2008:270) believes this practice of *nyai* among the local women to have been a degradation to the people in general and women in particular, who were exploited by both the colonizers and local men. Furthermore, in the issue related to the birth of offspring resulting from *nyai*, they were called “Indo” and not regarded as equal to Europeans within the colonial system itself. They, too, became victims of the power of men in a colonial situation.

Nonetheless, the negative perspective of the local community towards *nyai* in the early stages was slowly eroded when the Indonesian society began accepting them so much so that there existed a group of *nyai* that had a higher education and could voice their views and interests in a society controlled by the colonizers. *Nyai* came to be seen as a group of women who were progressive and who eventually played an important role, socially and economically, based on the position of their husbands (masters) (Linda Christanty, 1994:21). These *nyai* then became the voices of women in a world dominated by colonizers and powerful men.

## TRADITIONAL JAVANESE SOCIETY

Traditional Javanese society had a very rigid social stratification. There was a marked difference between the upper and lower classes in Javanese society (Koentjaraningrat, 2002:344). The upper class stratum comprised of the *priyayi* who were the officials and state nobility, the educated, officers and ranking officials, or those who were termed as *bendara-bendara*, whilst the lower stratum of society were *wong cilik* (normal citizen) comprised peasants, labourers and others, who, in reality, made up the majority.

The patriarchal system had stratified Javanese society based on gender difference i.e. men and women. Being a patriarchal society, the men were the ones who wielded power. The patriarchal system is clarified by Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan (1986:9) as follows:

...a social system where the father controls all members of family, all property and other economic resources, and makes all major decisions.

In a patriarchal society, women form a class which is dominated and this gives men the opportunity to exploit women. Women in such a society are normally subservient, have no right to voice out ideas and views, and respect

the men as heads of the household. In the Javanese household, the position of the father became very important in the family to the extent that it lent the father a special position in society, akin to being in a higher social class.

In Javanese society, the father determined everything concerning the family. He was the one who decided on the needs of the family members and commanded the respect of all members of the family. This shows that the family system in Javanese society was a patriarchal one where men had control to decide on the position of women. Therefore, Javanese custom was discriminatory and denied women their rights.

To Rich (1976:18), patriarchy (the power of the father) is a social system involving the family, ideology and politics, in which the position of men is that of decision-makers over women. Men decide on all matters that women have to undertake in their life, so much so that the control men have in all those matters close all opportunity for women to have any say or act freely in society.

Therefore, the social and cultural stratification in Javanese society made men the leaders who had to be respected and obeyed by all members of society, especially the women. Such a situation caused men to take advantage, and to exploit and discriminate against women because of the power they had in such patriarchal culture.

## **SANIKEM AND PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY**

*This Earth of Mankind (Bumi Manusia)* (2006) is the first book in the Buru trilogy by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. This novel was written while he was banished to the island of Buru. Using the early 1900s as a backdrop, a time when nationalism and patriotism began to take roots in Dutch Indies (Indonesia), he showcased women's efforts in liberating themselves and subsequently the nation from the clutches of colonialism and men's egos in a patriarchal society. Sanikem, who later became known as Nyai Ontosoroh, is an important character in representing women in this novel.

Sanikem is a village girl who becomes trapped in the practice of *nyai* due to the strong patriarchal system prevalent in the society of the era. Sanikem is sold by her father and can only surrender to fate. In Javanese society, a girl of Sanikem's age (13 years old), could be traded as goods if it was thought to be necessary by the father (Wong Soak Koon, 1995:120). Sastrotomo, Sanikem's father, is a clerk at a sugar factory owned by the Dutch. Sastrotomo is a man with high ambitions, and wants to be promoted

to the post of cashier, a position highly respected among the Javanese at the time. This is highlighted by Pramoedya Ananta Toer in *This Earth of Mankind* (*Bumi Manusia*):

*Sebagai jurubayar pabrik ia akan menjadi orang besar di Tulangan. Pedagang akan membukuk menghormati. Tuan-tuan Totok dan peranakan akan memberi tabik dalam Melayu. Guratan penanya berarti uang! Ia akan termasuk golongan berkuasa dalam pabrik.*

(As a cashier in the factory he would be someone respected at Tulangan. Businessmen would bow to him. People who were of pure blood and the offspring of mixed marriages would greet him in Malay. What he wrote meant money! He would be included in the powerful group in the factory.)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006:72)

Javanese women had to accept whosoever that had been decided by their father as their would-be husband. This shows how dominant the power of the father (men) was in determining whatsoever for the family. In a patriarchal society, according to Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan (1986:9), “man is superior to woman, [and] woman should be controlled by man, and are part of a man’s property”. This also applies to Javanese society. Men held the position of authority over women, resulting in the view that women were part of men’s property. Therefore, men in a patriarchal society could freely negate the voice and rights of women. The practice of usurping women’s rights coincides with Spivak’s views (1988a) which sees women as subaltern. Therefore, women’s voices continued to be silenced as a result of the power vested in the hands of men. In a patriarchal culture, Women lead life on the margins. Women’s marriages are determined by men, just as Sastrotomo decides on the marriage of his daughter, Sanikem:

*Ayah mempunyai rencana tersendiri tentang diriku. Biar pun ia dibenci, lamaran-lamaran datang meminang aku. Semua ditolak. Aku sendiri beberapa kali pernah mendengar dari kamarku. Ibuku tak punya hak bicara seperti wanita pribumi seumumnya. Semua ayah yang menentukan. Pernah ibu bertanya pada ayah, menantu apa yang ayah harapkan. Dan ayah tidak pernah menjawab.*

Father had other plans for me. Though he was despised, suitors kept asking for my hand. All were rejected. I had a few times heard from my room. My mother had no right to say anything, like other ordinary local women.



Everything was decided by father. Once mother asked father, what kind of son-in-law he hoped for. And father offered no answer.

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006:74)

Sanikem, like all Javanese women in traditional Javanese society, is deprived of her right to voice out her wishes concerning her choice of spouse. More unfortunately, at the time women were practically “sold” by men to other men in return for material gain and social status. This is further emphasized by Wong Soak Koon (1995:119) who says that women’s bodies became goods for men to fulfill their desires in the pursuit of status, position and power. Patriarchal society marginalizes women for the sake of their own egotistical interests.

Sanikem finally has to accept the fact that she is sold to a Western man. Sanikem loses all rights to determine her own life. Even her own father does not hear her voice. Her fortune as a subaltern woman is unfortunate as she does not get any protection from her own parents. In fact, she is chased from her own house as her father has used his authority to sell Sanikem to a Western man in order to secure position, money and rank for himself:

*Di atas kendaraan ayah bilang, suaranya terang tanpa keraguan: “Tengok rumahmu itu, Ikem. Mulai hari ini itu bukan rumahmu lagi.” Aku harus dapat memahami maksudnya. Kudengar Ibu tersedan-sedan. Memang aku sedang dalam pengusiran dari rumah.*

(On the cart, father said, his voice clear and unambiguous: “Look at your house, Ikem. As of today it is not your house anymore.” I could understand what he meant. I heard mother sob. I was actually being chased out of the house.)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006:110)

Sanikem is bound by her father’s authority. She was raised within the Javanese culture and customs which demand obedience towards parents, especially the father. Such discourse supports Spivak’s statement (1988) that the voice of subaltern women is not heard. A woman’s voice is silenced by the voice of a man who is more dominant in all situations, whether it is at the domestic or societal level. Such women’s rights in life are denied.

After Sanikem is sold, Sastrotomo receives his money (twenty five guilders) and the promise of a promotion to become cashier, which would give him a higher social status in Javanese society. This is depicted in the following excerpt:

*Dari kantongnya Tuan Besar Kuasa mengeluarkan sampul kertas dan menyerahkannya pada Ayah. Dari saku itu pula ia mengeluarkan selembar kertas berisi tulisan dan Ayah membubuhkan tandatangan di situ. Di kemudian hari kuketahui, sampul itu berisikan uang dua puluh lima gulden, penyerahan diriku kepadanya, dan janji Ayah akan diangkat jadi kassier setelah lulus dalam pemagangan selama dua tahun.*

(The Big Boss took out an envelope from his pocket and passed it to Father. From the pocket, too, he took out a piece of written paper and Father signed it. Later, I came to know that the envelope contained twenty-five guilders, for my surrender to him, and the promise that Father would be promoted to the post of cashier after a period of two years.)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006:77)

Sanikem is not in a position to object or avoid her father's ambition, in which she is nothing more than property. Being a member of a marginalized group, Sanikem is denied her right to determine whom she should marry, as well as the right to defend her honour. In this situation, it is not position and economy that are the main factors leading to the selling of Sanikem to a Western man but the authority wielded by Javanese men over women. That authority also caused the enslaving and trade of local women.

In an era in which patriarchal culture was deep-seated, women were regarded as goods that could be traded but if the seller did not possess the authority, the process of selling Sanikem's would not be able to take place. Sastrotoomo's authority as a father and man allows him to do whatever he likes with regard to his daughter. In this situation, Sanikem's rights are taken away and denied by her own father. Therefore, Sanikem can be labelled a subaltern, following the term as used by Spivak. Sanikem and her mother's voice is never heeded. It was normal and accepted in Javanese society that a father's authority as a leader and head of household had to be respected and obeyed in all decisions.

### **CAN SANIKEM SPEAK?**

In Spivak's concept of the subaltern woman, they have no voice because their voice has been usurped by other groups with vested interests. As such, the voice that is heard was not the "real" one of the subaltern. In the case of suttee, the voice of Indian women was not heard; what was heard instead was the voice of nationalists and the colonizers. In *Bumi Manusia*, Sanikem is

powerless against her father's action of selling her to a Western man. Sanikem does not say anything to object to the patriarchal system that uses women for its own interests. On the other hand, Sanikem accepts the fact that she would be a concubine or *nyai* to a merchant because she is obedient to her father. In this, Sanikem adheres to Javanese customs and traditions, which should strengthen the patriarchal system, but instead the opposite happens. Sanikem reacts by losing her respect and appreciation towards her father. Such an action is contradictory to Javanese custom in which children are expected to be very obedient and respectful of their parents. The patriarchal system in Javanese society had bound women so that they respected their elders, especially their own fathers (Geertz, 1983:59).

Sanikem leads a painful life as a subaltern, and she has to deal with it alone. Sanikem shows her objection towards her parents to the extent that she does not want to see or acknowledge them as her parents anymore, and becomes resentful for what her parents have done to her:

*Begitulah, Ann, upacara sederhana bagaimana seorang anak telah dijual oleh ayahnya sendiri, jurutulis Sastrotomo. Yang dijual adalah diriku: Sanikem. Sejak detik itu hilang sama sekali penghargaan dan hormatku pada ayahku; pada siapa saja yang dalam hidupnya pernah menjual anaknya sendiri. Untuk tujuan dan maksud apa pun.*

(That was it, Ann, a simple ceremony in which a child was sold by her own father, Clerk Sastrotomo. What was sold was me: Sanikem. From that instance I totally lost all esteem and respect for my father; for anyone who has ever sold their own child. For whatever reason.)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006:77)

Sanikem's statement shows the resentment of a daughter towards a father who purposely sold his child so as to raise his social status and cater to this on interest. A father should never be appreciated and respected by his daughter if he has brought her misery. Sanikem displayed her reaction towards her father's action by resenting Sastrotomo's action. This was evident from the following excerpt:

*Aku telah bersumpah dalam hati: takkan melihat orangtua dan rumahnya lagi. Mengingat mereka pun aku sudah tak sudi. Mama tak mau mengenangkan kembali peristiwa penghinaan itu. Mereka telah bikin aku jadi nyai begini. ....Ya, Ann, aku telah mendendam orangtua sendiri. Akan aku buktikan*

*pada mereka, apa pun yang telah diperbuat atas diriku, aku harus bisa lebih berharga daripada mereka, sekalipun hanya sebagai nyai.*

(I vowed in my heart never to see my parents or their house anymore. I did not even want to remember them. I did not ever want to remember the degrading incident again. They had turned me into a *nyai*... Yes, Ann, I vowed I would have revenge. I would prove to them, that whatever that was inflicted on me, I would be more valuable than they, even if I was only a *nyai*.)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 91)

Although the her repression and the incident of “seling” her to a Western man turned into a bitter experience, this does not make Sanikem lose hope. Sanikem’s decision not to acknowledge Sastroto as her father is a symbolic rejection of the traditional obedience expected in Javanese culture.

*...beberapa kali ayah datang menengok, dan aku tetap tolak menemuinya. “Temui ayahmu,” sekali Tuan Mellema menyuruh, “dia toh ayahmu sendiri.” “Aku memang ada ayah, dulu, sekarang tidak. Kalau dia bukan tamu Tuan, sudah aku usir.”*

(...several times father came to visit, and I was adamant in not seeing him. “Meet your father,” Mr Mellema once asked. “He is your father anyway.” “I used to have a father once but not now. If he weren’t your guest, I would have chased him away.”)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006: 99)

Sanikem quietly rejects the Javanese family tradition that requires that a child must always follow her father’s instructions. Sanikem’s hatred toward her father as a form of protest against the concept of “obedience”, to which every woman or child in a Javanese tradition was subjected, is the voice of the subaltern woman who attempts to protect her dignity and rights as a child, as a woman and as a person. Sanikem harbours this hatred is because she feels degraded due to her parent’s actions of trading her for power and a man’s egotism in securing position, status and money. This makes Sanikem refuse to forgive her parents:

*... Biar putus semua yang sudah-sudah. Luka terhadap kebanggaan dan harga diri tak juga mau hilang. Bila teringat kembali bagaimana hina aku dijual.... Aku tak mampu mengampuni kerakusan Sastroto dan kelemahan istrinya...*

(...Let the past be in the past. The pain inflicted on my and self-respect will never go away. When I remember how disgracefully I was sold....I cannot forgive Sastrotomo's greed and his wife's weakness...)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006:99)

Sanikem's mother fails to voice out as a wife to Sastrotomo to stop her husband from selling Sanikem. Sanikem hated her mother too for not able to do something that would avoid her from being sold to Herman Mellema. However, Sanikem, too, is unable to voice out her rights as a wife and daughter, just as her mother was unable to do.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer projects Sanikem as a character who has no voice regarding her rights in choosing a husband. It is only secretly that she resents her father's authority by keeping a grudge against her father and mother, and refusing to acknowledge them as her parents. The greed of securing rank, status and money had resulted in Sanikem's father using his authority as a man, which put him in the position of being able to sell his own daughter. As a consequence, Sanikem was outcast from her family. As a form of protest against her father's action, she ceases her relationship with her family. This protest by a subaltern woman is depicted by the author in the following excerpt:

*Pada suatu kali Ibu bersama Ayah datang ke Wonokromo, tuan merasa gelisah, mungkin malu, karena kau tetap tidak mau menemui. Tamu itu, menurut Tuan, telah merajuk minta bertemu. Ibu sampai menangis. Melalui Tuan aku katakan: "Anggaplah aku sebagai telornya yang telah jatuh dari petarangan. Pecah. Bukan telur yang salah." Dengan itu selesai persoalan antara diriku dengan orang tuaku.*

(Once, Mother and Father came to Wonokromo, and Master felt restless, probably embarrassed, because I still refused to see them. The visitors, according to Master begged to see me. Mother even cried. Through Master I said: "Think of me as an egg that has fallen from its basket. Broken. The egg is not to blame." With this, the issue between my parents and I was over.)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006:102)

Sanikem's hatred concerning what her father and mother had done could not change her unfortunate destiny. This passive resistance is the only thing that a weak person like Sanikem can do. However, Sanikem's resistance comes a little too late as she had already become Herman Mellema's *nyai* or

concubine by then. Actually Sanikem had no voice as she was silenced by the cultural factor, i.e. the patriarchal system of Javanese culture. Javanese women like Sanikem and her mother, like suttee women, could not speak out against what was being done to them. While the suttee women were represented by Indian nationalists and British colonizers Sanikem and her mother, representing Javanese women, are represented by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. To Spivak, this sort of representation could not bring out the real voice of subaltern women. This fact can also be seen in the novel *Bumi Manusia* where Pramoedya shows how Sanikem and her mother are unable to speak out about their rights. Thus Pramoedya's representation in this novel supports Spivak's view about subaltern women.

## NYAI ONTOSOROH AND COLONIAL SOCIETY

In Indonesia, during the colonial era, between the 19th and 20th century, local women experienced many difficulties and untold misery. In the postcolonial context, women shouldered an additional burden because they were oppressed by both the authority of colonizers and by local men themselves. Local women became part of the lower stratum that were easily manipulated by the authority of men and the colonizers. This issue is discussed in the novel *Bumi Manusia*.

Life as a *nyai* to powerful men was not a happy one. In actual fact these women were also exploited and turned into slaves in order to satisfy the desires of their masters. In this respect, the author wants to show that Javanese women continue to be oppressed and their rights taken away by the males of the colonial power. These women were first denied their rights by powerful men in their patriarchal culture, and then by the colonizers. Sanikem was made a *nyai* or concubine. In other words, Sanikem became Nyai Ontosoroh. This change of status does not bring about any difference because it merely continues her exploitation at the hand of men. Herman Mellema is merely continuing men's dominance, albeit adding a new dimension, which is the colonial one. This new dimension makes the exploitation only more severe. As a marginalized woman, Nyai Ontosoroh had to be ready at all times to face the possibility of losing whatever she then owned. Nyai Ontosoroh's status as a *nyai* causes her not to feel secure where her future is concerned. The following excerpt displays her predicament:

*Dia cuma seorang budak belian yang kewajibannya hanya memuaskan tuannya. Dalam segala hal! Sebaliknya setiap waktu orang harus bersiap-*

*siap terhadap kemungkinan tuannya sudah merasa bosan. Salah-salah bisa badan diusir dengan semua anak, anak sendiri, yang tidak dihargai oleh umum Pribumi karena dilahirkan tanpa perkawinan syah.*

(She is only a bought slave whose duty is to satisfy her master. In all matters! On the other hand, she has to prepare against the possibility that her master will tire of her. Worst of all, she could be chased out with all her children, her own children, who are not recognized by the locals as they were not born out of a legal marriage.)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006:80)

In other words, a marginalized *nyai* in such a patriarchal Javanese society would become even more marginalized when entering the colonizer's society. She is a concubine to a colonizer. Her status as a *nyai* itself caused isolation from her family, while her position in the European social circle was insecure.

### **NYAI ONTOSOROH'S VOICE?**

Nyai Ontosoroh is not a simple *nyai* because she is a woman who does not succumb easily to exploitation. After quietly protesting against her father's brutality, Nyai Ontosoroh stands up against her own exploitation. Despite having lost the battle with her father, Nyai prepares herself to go against the colonizers. Nyai refuses to be taken as a lowly local woman who is used to fulfill the wishes of the colonizers. According to Nyai, the colonizer's hegemony must be abolished. Hence, Nyai Ontosoroh uses all available opportunities to establish herself in various skills deemed highly by the West, socially and domestically. She works very hard towards her own independence and organizes her every step to rebel against her father and reclaim her honour. While she is living with Herman Mellema, the man she is sold to, she begins preparing herself to face every possibility as evident in the following excerpt:

*Pada waktu itu mama mulai merasa senang, berbahagia. Ia selalu mengindahkan aku, menanyakan pendapatku, mengajak aku memperbincangkan semua hal. Lama kelamaan aku merasa sederajat dengannya.... Tetapi sikapku tetap: mempersiapkan diri untuk tidak akan lagi tergantung pada siapa pun...*

(At the time, I began to feel relaxed and happy. He took care of me, asked my views, invited me to discuss everything with him. Eventually, I felt I was

on equal footing with him...But my attitude remained the same: to prepare myself so that I never have to depend on anyone...)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006:92-93)

Nyai Ontosoroh's progressive thoughts and actions persuade Herman Mellema to not only provide her with a better life but also to entrust her with managing his dairy business called Buitenzorg. Because of that, Nyai Ontosoroh, formerly known as Sanikem, comes to be called Nyai Buitenzorg by the locals employed in the business, especially the women. As Nyai Buitenzorg or Nyai Ontosoroh, Sanikem becomes more respected and valued by the people around her. Nyai's struggle against colonial exploitation towards a woman like herself was done intellectually. Nyai is determined to be a woman who would stand tall among the colonizers in terms of knowledge. In only two years, Nyai Ontosoroh is able to learn and master European the way of life and culture, and learns farm management from her master Herman Mellema. She is able to raise her status from an ordinary local woman and *nyai* to that of a human being who deserves to be respected and valued. This is signified by the change of her name from Sanikem to Nyai Buitenzorg or Nyai Ontosoroh:

*...Perusahaan semakin besar. Tanah bertambah luas. Kami dapat membeli hutan liar desa di perbatasan tanah kita. Semua dibeli atas namaku. Belum ada sawah atau ladang pertanian. Setelah perusahaan begitu besar, Tuan mulai membayar tenagaku, juga dari tahun-tahun yang sudah. Dengan uang itu aku beli pabrik beras dan peralatan kerja lainnya. Sejak itu perusahaan bukan milik Tuan Mellema saja sebagai tuanku, juga milikku. Kemudian aku mendapat juga pembagian keuntungan selama lima tahun sebesar lima ribu gulden. Tuan mewajibkan aku menyimpannya di bank atas namaku sendiri. Sekarang perusahaan dinamai Boerderij Buitenzorg. Karena semua urusan dalam aku yang menangani, orang yang berhubungan denganku memanggil aku Nyai Ontosoroh, Nyai Buitenzorg.*

(...The business continued to expand. Our land became larger. We were able to purchase the some forests that bordered our land. All were purchased in my name. There weren't any padi fields or other fields yet. When the business became that big, Master began paying for my effort, and those of past years. With the money I bought a rice mill and other equipment. From that time on, the business did not solely belong to Master Mellema, as my master, but was also mine. I also got my share of the profits for the previous five years, five thousand guilders. Master made sure that I kept it in the



bank under my name. Now the business is called Boerderij Buitenzorg. As I handled all internal matters, those who had dealings with me called me Nyai Ontosoroh, Nyai Buitenzorg.)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006:96-97)

The above excerpt depicts Nyai Ontosoroh's position as a *nyai* who could improve her economic status and develop her master's business. Her ability to manage the farm well and her proactiveness make her master acknowledge Nyai Ontosoroh talents, and accept her opinion and views. Evidently, Nyai Ontosoroh's efforts to become a successful local woman and assimilating into the colonizer's culture succeed. Nyai Ontosoroh is able to prove that when the colonized class as well as the *nyai* are given the opportunity, they can be on equal footing with the colonizers who think themselves civilized.

Nyai Ontosoroh practices the way of life of the colonizers so that she can take her place amongst the Europeans. In understanding the Dutch language and familiarizing herself with Dutch culture, Nyai Ontosoroh is able to interact with the Europeans in her master's place. She refuses to be the kind of *nyai* who would always be under her master's power. Nyai Ontosoroh intelligently speaks out about her rights and objects to the patriarchy by way of clever moves, without having to use force:

*Bahasa Belandanya cukup fasih, baik dan beradab; sikap pada anaknya halus dan bijaksana, dan terbuka, tidak seperti ibu-ibu pribumi; tingkah lakunya tak beda dengan wanita Eropa terpelajar. Ia seperti seorang guru dari aliran baru yang bijaksana itu...*

(Her Dutch language was fluent, good and cultured; her attitude towards her daughter was refined and wise, and open, not like other local mothers; her behaviour was no different from the learned European women. She was like a teacher from a new movement who was wise...)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006:22)

The above excerpt offers a description of Nyai Ontosoroh's attitude and behaviour, which is similar to that of a European lady. She dresses, acts and communicates like one. Speaking fluent Dutch, Nyai has given the impression that she is an educated and cultured lady although she has never received any formal education. "I have never been to school, Nak, Nyo, never been taught to look up to the Europeans." (*Bumi Manusia*, 377). In this regard too, Magda Peters, a European teacher, is amazed at Nyai

Ontosoroh, who not only can speak Dutch but is also knowledgeable about current affairs through her reading was and is able to manage her business so successfully that even the Europeans themselves acknowledge it. What Nyai Ontosoroh does is something extraordinary among Indonesians of the time, who were mostly backward, marginalized and illiterate. Nyai Ontosoroh succeeds in changing her image from being a mere sex tool for a Dutch man to being someone who leads a progressive lifestyle and who has abilities on par with the European colonizers, symbolized by the fact that she is able to manage the business just like Herman Mellema. One of Nyai Ontosoroh's children is Annelies Mellema. Nyai raises her daughter to be a dignified local woman, like herself. As a daughter to Herman Mellema, Annelies enjoys a slightly higher status than the local women. As she is raised by her mother, Annelies grows up as a local woman embracing the local culture and speaking out against the colonizers. With the education, training and consciousness instilled by her mother as a local woman who hated the injustices of the colonizers, Annelies emerges as a respected and admired woman in her society.

From Herman Mellema's point of view, Nyai Ontosoroh is not a subaltern woman anymore. But Herman Mellema's view is not to the same as the view of Dutch laws. When Maurits Mellema, a son from Herman Mellema's marriage to a Dutch woman, comes to claim his dues from Herman Mellema, he humiliates Nyai Ontosoroh and her children badly:

*Tuan secara hukum masih suami ibuku. Tapi tuanlah yang justru telah mengambil seorang wanita Pribumi sebagai teman tidur, tidak untuk sehari-dua, sudah berbelas tahun! Siang dan malam. Tanpa perkawinan syah. Tuan sudah menyebabkan lahirnya dua orang anak haram-jadah!*

(Legally you are still husband to my mother. But you have taken a local woman to share your bed, not for a day, but for years! Day and night. Without a legal marriage. You have caused two illegitimate children to be born!)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006: 91)

Nyai Ontosoroh's marriage to Herman Mellema is not recognized as a legal bond, and she is looked down upon by her stepson. Sanikem's children are also considered illegitimate. The colonizer's laws have an effect on the relationship between Nyai Ontosoroh and Herman Mellema. Ironically, the colonizers practice concubinage but Dutch law does not recognize it. Because of this, Herman Mellema's death in a brothel is deemed to be fully caused

by Nyai Ontosoroh's inability to take care of her "master", though in reality it is the fault of Herman Mellema himself. Unlike at the time of her sale to Herman Mellema where Nyai Ontosoroh was merely able to protest in a passive way, this time she is at the height of her control over the family and property of Herman Mellema, and has to speak out in protest. This happens when the Dutch administrators do not recognize her status as the owner of the business and as the mother of her two children. The death of Herman Mellema is cause for the appearance of the character of Maurits Mellema, a symbolic figure of those colonizers who view the locals, including women like Nyai Ontosoroh, with contempt.

Nyai Ontosoroh is prepared for any possibility that could befall herself and her enterprise. The colonial court is bound to side Maurits Mellema as he is part of their system. This becomes a reality when she receives the official letter on the decision of the Amsterdam court which, among other things, states:

*Berdasarkan permohonan dari Ir. Maurist Mellema, anak mendiang Tuan Herman Mellema, melalui advokatnya Tuan Mr Hans Graeg, berkedudukan di Amsterdam, Pengadilan Amsterdam, berdasarkan surat-surat resmi dari Surabaya yang tidak dapat diragukan kebenarannya, memutuskan menguasai seluruh harta-benda mendiang Tuan Herman Mellema untuk kemudian karena tidak ada tali perkawinan syah antara Tuan Herman Mellema dengan Sanikem membagi menjadi: Tuan Herman Mellema sebagai anak syah mendapat bagian 4/6 harta peninggalan; Annelis dan Robert Mellema sebagai anak diaku masing-masing mendapat 1/6 harta peninggalan.*

(Upon the application filed by Maurits Mellema, son of the late Herman Mellema, through his advocate Mr Hans Graegg, originating from Amsterdam, Amsterdam Court, pursuant to official letters originating from Surabaya, the authenticity of which cannot be challenged, it is so hereby ordered that Maurits Mellema is the beneficiary of all property of the late Herman Mellema as there was no legal marriage between Herman Mellema and Sanikem, and so apportioned: Maurits Mellema as the legal son to receive 4/6 of the property, Annelies and Robert Mellema being his legally recognized children, to each receive 1/6 of the property.)

*(Bumi Manusia, 2006:366)*

The above excerpt shows the arbitrary actions of the colonizers towards the local community who administer the life of the subaltern group for their own benefit. The colonizers' court deems the property of Nyai Ontosoroh

as part of the property amassed by Herman Mellema that should be handed over to someone who had a legally-recognized relationship with him.

Apart from confiscating the property of the late Herman Mellema, Maurits Mellema also wants to take away Nyai Ontosoroh's children, Annelies and Robert Mellema, who are not recognized as Nyai Ontosoroh's children. Dutch law does not recognize Nyai Ontosoroh as the mother to her children. The case concerning Nyai Ontosoroh's rights to her children is brought to the Dutch court. The court uphold the decision that Nyai Ontosoroh does not have right over her children. Nyai's rights as a mother were greedily usurped by the colonizers. The author depicts the situation in the excerpt below:

*Pada mulanya aku duga, dengan pengakuan itu anak-anakku akan mendapatkan pengakuan hukum sebagai anak syah. Ternyata tidak, Ann. Abangmu dan kau tetap dianggap anak tidak syah, hanya diakui sebagai anak Tuan Mellema dan punya hak menggunakan namanya. Dengan campurtangan Pengadilan hukum justru tidak mengakui abangmu dan kau sebagai anakku, bukan anak-anakku lagi, walau Mama ini yang melahirkan. ... Kalian mendapatkan seorang ayah, tapi kehilangan ibu.*

(Initially I thought that with such acknowledgement my children would be recognized as legitimate. It was otherwise, Ann. Your brother and you are still deemed illegitimate, only recognized as the children of Mr Mellema, and could use his name. The court decision, however, meant that you and your brother were no longer recognized as my children. You are not my children anymore, although I was the one who gave you birth. .... You got a father but lost a mother.)

*(Bumi Manusia, 2006: 97-98)*

Nyai Ontosoroh loses all rights on her children. The courts only recognize her children as the children of Herman Mellema and not as the lawful children of Nyai Ontosoroh, according to the Dutch law. This situation shows that the *nyai* were marginalized in colonial times. Their voice was not taken into account and they were denied their rights. Nyai, as a subaltern woman, is silenced.

According to the rules and regulations of Western laws, Maurits Mellema holds the authority to take Annelies to Holland with him. Maurits Mellema receives all kinds of support and facilities and uses these to control Annelies Mellema. Maurits has the advantage of being the administrator of Annelies's property as she is still underage. Apart from that, as the lawful son of Herman

Mellema, Maurits Mellema inherits the property that belonged to Herman Mellema and Nyai Ontosoroh.

The Dutch court was used by Maurits Mellema to impose his colonial authority on Nyai Ontosoroh and her daughter. Nyai Ontosoroh is unable to reverse the verdict of the colonial court which considers her to have been at fault. The court's decision unmasks the attitude of the colonizers who always exploit women's weak status. The court is used by the colonizers to reject the voice and the struggle of Nyai Ontosoroh:

*Pada akhirnya semua akan berarti alat hanya untuk merampasi segala apa yang kami sayangi dan kami punyai: kehormatan, keringat, hak, bahkan juga anak dan istri.*

(In the end it all was nothing more than a tool to take away all that we love and we own: honour, sweat, rights, and even our children and wife.)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006:497)

Nyai Ontosoroh is deemed to be unequal to the Dutch although she has had a relationship with a Dutch man; she is not even allowed to use the Dutch language during the proceedings:

*Ia tidak diperbolehkan menggunakan bahasa Belanda. Ia diperintahkan menggunakan Jawa, menolak, dan menggunakan Melayu.*

(She was not allowed to speak in Dutch. She was instructed to use Javanese, which she refused, and used Malay instead.)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006:316)

This language issue is important to be discussed here. The Dutch language, being the official language of the courts, gives the Dutch colonizers a position of superiority. Other language are not seen as being on par with Dutch in terms of status. When Nyai Ontosoroh uses the Malay language, she still cannot voice out her rights as mother to Annelies Mellema. To the Dutch colonists, the Malay language is not an acceptable language of communication and thus because she chooses to speak Malay, Nyai will not receive justice from the court. The court denies Nyai Ontosoroh's right as a mother to her daughter. This edging out of the marginalized subaltern like Nyai Ontosoroh is a manifestation of double marginalization of subaltern women whereby she is edged out by the patriarchy as well as the colonial authority. This was

something normal for a *nyai* women who were constantly oppressed by men whether in the patriarchal system of their society or the by the colonizers.

To Spivak (1988a) subaltern women cannot directly voice out their views, just as suttee women were silenced by the nationalists and colonizers in India. Spivak not only uses the institution of suttee in India as an example but also gives an example of an incident in India in 1926, where an Indian woman named Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, who was asked to perform a political assassination but who refused to do it and committed suicide instead. She killed herself while menstruating so that she would not be accused of having had a sexual relationship. However, her cousins still thought Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri had had an illicit sexual relationship. To Spivak, this incident proves subaltern women like Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri cannot voice out their problems directly. Their voice can only be heard through a different medium which is not their real voice. The case of Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri and suttee women shows that subaltern women cannot speak for themselves, they are (mis)represented, and thereby silenced. In the case of Nyai Ontosoroh, this subaltern woman attempts to speak up for her rights as a mother in court but still is not taken seriously. The final destiny of Nyai Ontosoroh, Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri and the suttee women is the same, as they were not taken seriously by the authorities. Only in this novel, Nyai speaks, even if it is on an unfair legal “stage”. Thus, Nyai Ontosoroh and Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, although both subaltern women, are not equal. Nyai Ontosoroh has the space to speak out against authority, whereas Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri and suttee women did not have such an opportunity. Nyai Ontosoroh realizes the extent of the power of the colonizers over the colonized. She is prepared to lose in the trial and not ashamed of it; instead, she is proud because she did not surrender easily. This can be seen in the excerpt below:

*“Dengan melawan kita takkan sepenuhnya kalah,” dan nada ucapannya adalah pengetahuan bakal kalah.*

(“By fighting we will not be entirely defeated,” the tone of her statement was that of someone knowing that she was going to lose.)

*(Bumi Manusia, 2006:377)*

At the end of the novel, Pramoedya Ananta Toer shows the defeat of women against an established system that marginalizes subaltern women:

*Annelies harus tahu: kita kalah, tertindas tanpa bisa membela diri apalagi melawan.*

(Annelies needed to know: we were defeated, oppressed without being able to defend ourselves, let alone fight.)

(*Bumi Manusia*, 2006:517)

Nyai Ontosoroh is a subaltern woman overcome by the powerful. Beginning with her father to Herman Mellema, Nyai Ontosoroh is exploited but she tries to voice her rights as a daughter and a mother. The way Nyai Ontosoroh speaks up for her rights begins as a quiet protest and ends with her eventually speaking in court. However, both these methods do not have any effect on those in positions of power. Nyai Ontosoroh is denied her rights.

Nyai's voice in the novel *Bumi Manusia* (*This Earth of Mankind*) is the voice of the author, i.e. Pramoedya. Pramoedya Ananta Toer represents Nyai Ontosoroh—an ideological representation, according to Spivak's point of view. Being represented, Nyai Ontosoroh, like suttee women in India who were represented by nationalists and the colonizers, is not actually speaking. The fact remains that subaltern women like Nyai Ontosoroh and suttee women are silenced by the ones in power.

## CONCLUSION

Pramoedya Ananta Toer ends the story of Sanikem/Nyai Ontosoroh in *Bumi Manusia* with the protagonist's defeat to men's and the colonizers' authority. Sanikem is denied her right to speak against her exploitation by men (her father), whereby she is sold to a Dutch man. Nyai Ontosoroh is also denied her right over her daughter. The Dutch court is used to silence Nyai Ontosoroh. Nyai Ontosoroh is further denied use of the Dutch language, which is the language of those in power, i.e. the Dutch colonizers, and this reflects that the true voice of a subaltern woman like Nyai Ontosoroh is denied. Furthermore, the voicing of Sanikem/Nyai Ontosoroh's struggle is represented by a male author, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, which has ideological implications, as stressed by Spivak. Nyai Ontosoroh is a subaltern woman whose voice is denied because she lives within the Javanese culture, in which the patriarchal system is deep-rooted. Dutch colonialism further extended the oppression of women like Sanikem/Nyai Ontosoroh by patriarchal society by turning them into *nyai* and separating them from their children via a legal system

that sided with the colonizers. Women were oppressed politically by Dutch colonialism, and socially through the patriarchal Javanese culture. Both denied women their rights to speak out. Close study successfully proves that Sanikem/Nyai Ontosoroh is a subaltern woman, according to Spivak's criteria.

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