

“To be Born Native is to be in the Wrong”: *Nyai Ontosoroh*, Double Colonization, and Subaltern Contestation

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Abstract

This paper examines *Nyai Ontosoroh* in Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s *This Earth of Mankind* (1980) as an important figure of postcolonial feminist resistance rather than a supporting character in Minke’s nationalist awakening. Situated within the socio-legal structure of the Dutch East Indies, this study explores how *nyai* embodies the contradictions of colonialism and patriarchy through her position as a *nyai* or native concubine. While previous readings often reduce her to a symbolic motherland or moral catalyst, this paper argues that her narrative gives the novel’s strongest critique of colonial injustice and gendered oppression. Using postcolonial feminist theory, this study employs qualitative textual analysis grounded in Petersen and Rutherford’s double colonization theory, Spivak’s subalternity and epistemic violence, Bhabha’s hybridity, and Mohanty’s concept of the third world woman. Through close reading, the analysis presents how *nyai* appropriates language, education, and commerce as forms of counter-hegemonic resistance against both indigenous patriarchy and Dutch colonial authority. Findings show that *nyai*’s final legal defeat does not signify failure of her agency, but rather exposes a system structurally incapable of recognizing the humanity and legitimacy of colonized women. Her silenced voices become a strong indictment of epistemic violence and unveils the enduring tensions between resistance, gender, and colonial power.

Keywords: *Double colonization, Epistemic violence, Nyai Ontosoroh, Postcolonial feminism, Subaltern agency*

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Article History

Received: May 7, 2026

Revised: July 10, 2026

Accepted: July 19, 2026

Published: July 22, 2026

Suggested Citation:

Javier, W. (2026). “To be born native is to be in the wrong”: *Nyai ontosoroh*, double colonization, and subaltern contestation. *Langkit Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 15(1), 57-71.
<https://doi.org/10.62071/zw6snf07>

Introduction

Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *This Earth of Mankind* (Bumi Manusia), first published in Indonesian in 1980 and later translated into English by Max Lane in 1996, is widely regarded as one of the foundational texts of modern Indonesian literature and postcolonial writing. As the opening novel of the Buru Quartet, it traces the emergence of nationalist consciousness during the final decades of Dutch colonial rule through the experiences of Minke, a young Javanese aristocrat educated within the colonial system. Written while Toer was imprisoned on Buru Island as a political detainee, the novel itself bears the marks of colonial and authoritarian repression, making its interrogation of power, race, gender, and justice inseparable from the conditions under which it was produced. Beyond its historical significance, *This Earth of Mankind* has become a central text in postcolonial literary studies because it exposes the contradictions of colonial modernity through the intimate spaces of family, education, and law.

Among the novel's most compelling figures is Nyai Ontosoroh, whose life unsettles the rigid racial, legal, and gendered hierarchies upon which Dutch colonial authority depended. Although much critical attention has focused on Minke's political awakening as the novel's principal narrative of national consciousness, Nyai Ontosoroh increasingly occupies a distinctive place in literary scholarship as one of Southeast Asia's most complex representations of a colonized woman. Neither merely a victim of colonial domination nor simply a symbol of nationalist resistance, she inhabits the contradictory position of a *nyai* – an indigenous concubine whose domestic, intellectual, and economic labor sustains the colonial household while remaining excluded from the legal protections of colonial society. It is through this paradoxical position that Toer constructs one of his sharpest critiques of colonialism, patriarchy, and the limits of justice, making Nyai Ontosoroh an especially productive figure for postcolonial feminist analysis.

In the socio-legal architecture of the Dutch East Indies, few figures were as important or as precarious as the *nyai*. The native concubine to a European man, the *nyai* occupied a large liminal space on the threshold of the colonial domestic sphere while being legally excluded from its protections (Niekerk, 2023). The institution of the *nyai* emerged from the racial and legal structures of the Dutch East Indies, where formal marriages between European men and indigenous women were often discouraged or rendered socially undesirable by colonial policies and racial hierarchies. In this context, many European officials, merchants, and planters entered informal domestic unions with indigenous women who became their companions, household managers, and the primary caregivers of their children. Despite performing roles virtually indistinguishable from those of wives, *nyai* remained outside the protection of colonial law. They possessed no legal claim to property, inheritance, or even to the children they bore, whose status ultimately depended upon the recognition of their European fathers.

As Ann Laura Stoler (2023) argues, these intimate domestic arrangements were not peripheral to colonial governance but constituted one of its central mechanisms, where race, gender, sexuality, and power converged to sustain imperial authority. The *nyai*, therefore, occupied a profoundly paradoxical position: indispensable to the functioning of colonial households yet legally invisible within the very system they helped sustain. Against this historical backdrop, the *nyai* became a living testament to the hypocrisies of the colonial project, a figure whose intimate labor – both domestic and sexual—was indispensable to the

stability of the European household while her individuality was systematically denied by colonial law. The *nyai*, as a paradox, would wield strong informal power within the home while staying as a “ghost” in the eye of the state. She embodies the contradictions of race, gender, and power - serving as the fulcrum for the era’s most potent critiques. Toer even writes for the character of *Nyai Ontosoroh*, “I learned to read and write, Child... That's my weapon. A person who is clever can stand up for their rights, can't they? Both in this world and the next” (Toer, 1996, p. 59).

Against this historical backdrop, Toer places *Nyai Ontosoroh* at the moral and intellectual center of *This Earth of Mankind* (1980), the first novel in the *Buru Quartet*. As the genesis of a tetralogy that seeks to show a modern Indonesian consciousness into being, the novel is often read as a national *bildungsroman* (Mukhtarom, 2022), charting the political awakening of the main character, Minke, from a Javanese aristocrat enraptured with European enlightenment to a rising anti-colonial journalist. Much critical attention has focused on Minke as the vessel for the national consciousness. Within the Minke-centric frameworks, the character of *Nyai Ontosoroh* is usually instrumentalized.

The existing scholarship has consistently recognized *Nyai Ontosoroh* as one of the most compelling figures in *This Earth of Mankind*. Scholars have variously interpreted her as a feminist icon who resists patriarchal domination (Santari, 2023), a symbol of women's intersectional resistance under colonial rule (Mukti et al., 2023), a moral and intellectual mentor whose influence shapes Minke's political awakening (Waluyo et al., 2021), and an embodiment of anti-colonial consciousness within the Dutch East Indies (Mukhtarom, 2022). Collectively, these studies have demonstrated the significance of her agency, resilience, and educational self-transformation, establishing *Nyai* as a central figure in discussions of gender, nationalism, and colonial resistance. However, these readings have largely emphasized the outcomes of her resistance while giving comparatively less attention to the historical specificity of her position as a *nyai* and to the ways in which colonial legality, indigenous patriarchy, and epistemic violence intersect to structure both her agency and its limitations. By bringing together the concepts of double colonization, subalternity, epistemic violence, and Mohanty's critique of the homogenized “Third World Woman,” this article argues that *Nyai Ontosoroh*'s significance lies not simply in her resistance but in how her contested subjectivity exposes the structural impossibility of full recognition within the colonial order. Therefore, I will place *Nyai Ontosoroh* at the center of the story in this paper, arguing that her experience provides the novel’s strongest critique of an unjust world. While Minke’s journey is important, it is *Nyai*’s defiant voice and her personal battle as a concubine that truly expose the cruelty of both the racist Dutch colonial system and the patriarchal rules of both European and Javanese society. Yet she is far from being a passive victim - she, instead, turns the tools of her oppressors into her own weapons by mastering their language and business practices. Her loss in the Dutch courtroom is not a sign that her voice failed but a strong criticism of a system built to be deaf to specific people.

Building on these discussions, this article argues that *Nyai Ontosoroh* should be understood not merely as a feminist icon, a maternal figure, or a symbol of anti-colonial nationalism, but as a historically situated *nyai* whose contested subjectivity exposes the intersecting operations of colonial power and indigenous patriarchy. While previous studies have provided valuable insights into her resistance, educational self-fashioning, and influence on Minke's political awakening, comparatively less attention has been devoted to examining how the institution of the *nyai* itself structures both the possibilities and the limits of her agency. By reading *Nyai Ontosoroh* through an integrated postcolonial feminist

framework that brings together the concepts of double colonization, subalternity, epistemic violence, and Mohanty's critique of the homogenized "Third World Woman," this article demonstrates that her ultimate significance lies not only in her capacity to resist but also in the structural impossibility of achieving full legal and epistemic recognition within the colonial order. In doing so, this study contributes to postcolonial literary scholarship by repositioning Nyai Ontosoroh as a historically specific subaltern subject whose experiences illuminate the intimate entanglements of gender, colonial law, and knowledge production in the Dutch East Indies.

Method: Double Colonization and the Question of the Subaltern

In this qualitative paper with textual analysis, the foundational concept for understanding Nyai's position is that of double colonization. Primarily coined by theorists, Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, in their collection *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Postcolonial Women's Writing* this framework asserts that women in colonial situations are oppressed on two simultaneous fronts: first by the external, imperial power of colonialism, and second by the internal, patriarchal structures of their own indigenous societies. The female colonized subject is thus "colonized by the colonizer, and then colonized by the colonized man" (Petersen and Rutherford, 1986). In Toer's *This Earth of Mankind*, this dual oppression is the architecture of Nyai's life. She is first subjugated by an indigenous patriarchy when her own father sells her to the Dutch businessman, Herman Mellema. She is then subjugated by the colonial-patriarchal system, which legally defines her as a concubine (*nyai*), denies her rights to her property, and refuses to recognize her as the legitimate mother of her two children. Her struggle is therefore not simply against the Dutch; it is a complicated negotiation with a world where both the colonizer and her native culture have defined her as "subordinate" or "secondary."

This condition of marginalization raises a question in postcolonial theory, famously written by Gayatri Spivak: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak's question is not about the physical ability to produce sound, but about whether a subject from the lowest strata of society (the subaltern) can articulate their reality in a way that is heard and identified as legitimate by the dominant structures of power (Spivak, 2009). Nyai Ontosoroh presents a case study for interrogating Spivak's question. On the surface, she speaks with resounding clarity. She is articulate, intelligent, and masters the colonizer's language and commercial practices, using them as "weapons" (Santari, 2023). However, to read her as a simple affirmative answer to Spivak's question is to miss the core of the argument. The tragedy of Nyai's story lies in the idea of epistemic violence: the process by which colonial power invalidates and erases the knowledge, truths, and legitimacy of the colonized (Brunner, 2021). While Nyai speaks eloquently in the Dutch courtroom, the legal system is structurally incapable of hearing her testimony as valid. Her motherhood, her labor, and her moral rights are rendered meaningless. Through this part of Toer's book, her narrative does demonstrate that the subaltern can speak, but their speech can be systematically nullified by a power that refuses to grant its status.

In analyzing Nyai Ontosoroh, it is important to resist the homogenizing tendencies critiqued by Chandra Mohanty. In her seminal essay, *Under Western Eyes* (1984), Mohanty warns against the construction of a monolithic "Third World Woman" - a singular figure typically portrayed as an uneducated, tradition-bound, and powerless victim (Mohanty, 2023). Pramoedya's portrayal of Nyai stands in stark defiance of such a stereotype. Her specific intersection of identities (a native woman, a mother, but also an educated and

economically powerful figure), creates a unique form of agency and a specified struggle. The fight is not that of every colonized woman, but a battle shaped by her class mobility and intellectual prowess.

With these interconnected concepts - a resistance to homogenization as a commitment to her individuality, double colonization as the diagnosis of her condition, epistemic violence as the analysis of her ultimate defeat, and - I will now turn to the text itself to explore how *Nyai Ontosoroh* navigates, resists, and is ultimately constrained by the web of power that the mentioned theories help to illuminate.

Forging a Counter-Hegemony: Knowledge and Identity

In Chandra Mohanty's (1984) seminal critique, *Under Western Eyes*, she explores the tendency of Western discourse of the "Third World Woman." Toer's portrayal of *Nyai Ontosoroh* stands as a strong literary rebuttal to this homogenization. Far from being a silent object of the colonial and patriarchal forces that seek to define her, *Nyai* emerges as a subject of her own making. She becomes a figure whose agency is molded precisely through the strategic appropriation of knowledge, identity, and resistance. Her story is not one of victimhood, but of calculated resistance waged from within the oppressive structures around her.

Nyai's epistemic resistance: the appropriation of knowledge

Nyai's agency is not a passive endurance but an active, strategic counter-offensive waged from the margins. It starts with the appropriation of knowledge - the primary tool of colonial power. Recognizing that she was sold by her father into a system that thrives on native ignorance, *Nyai* begins a radical program of self-education as observed in her conversation with Minke:

How's that possible? Mama speaks, reads, and maybe also writes Dutch. How is that possible without schooling?

Why not? Life can give everything to whoever tries to understand and is willing to receive new knowledge.' Her answer truly startled me. Such words had never been spoken by my teachers" (Toer, 1996, p. 72).

Her mastery of Dutch is also not an act of assimilation but a deliberate act of epistemic resistance as seen in Minke's description:

I was amazed not only that this Native woman could speak Dutch so well, but also that she was so relaxed with a male guest. Where was she educated? And why was she only a *nyai*, a concubine? And who educated her to be so free, just like a European woman? (p. 30).

This exemplifies what Frantz Fanon identified as the ambivalent power of language in colonial contexts in his 1952 book, *Black Skin White Masks* (Stawarska and Ring, 2023). While it marks subjugation, it can also be reappropriated to resist subjugation. *Nyai's* linguistic fluency permits her to negotiate, command, and challenge the Europeans on her own terms. This turns the colonizer's idiom into an instrument of self-assertion.

Nyai's resistance is not confined to words but extends even to economic action. By mastering business, she transforms her household (primarily a site for sexual service) into an enterprise that commands respect from others. Toer's novel underlines this transformation: "What sort of family was this? Two women, mother and daughter, working silently away to maintain a family and a business as big as this?" (Toer, 1996, p. 66). Through commerce, Nyai claims epistemic authority. Her success makes her what Homi Bhabha might call a *hybrid agent*, which means a figure who inhabits a space of mimicry yet subverts it (Rezaei and Amjad, 2022). By mastering colonial techniques of production, she reveals the colonizer's dependency on the labor and knowledge of the colonized.

Nyai's social resistance: redefining the "nyai"

This intellectual and economical self-reclamation culminates in the re-signification of her name as well. The title *nyai*, meant to denote sexual shame and legal non-existence (Mukti et. al., 2023), becomes a signifier of authority. *Nyai* Ontosoroh declares defiantly:

They had made me into a nyai like this. So I must become a *nyai*, a bought slave, a good nyai, the very best *nyai*. I studied everything possible about my master's wants: cleanliness, Malay, making the bed, ordering the house, cooking European food. Yes, Ann, I would have revenge upon my parents. I had to prove to them that whatever they had done to me, I would be more worthy of respect than they, even if only as a nyai (Toer, 1996, p. 88).

In this discursive inversion, *Nyai* performs what Spivak describes as the subaltern's "speaking back" - she refuses erasure by changing the linguistic marker of her oppression into a testament of self-creation.

Her counter-hegemonic project reaches its zenith in her mentorship to Minke. In this relationship, the colonial and patriarchal hierarchies are reversed. Minke, the Western-educated native man, is intellectually subordinate to *Nyai* - who becomes his teacher in the political realities of colonial rule. She disabuses him of his native faith in European justice:

Yes, child, Nyo, we must fight back, we must resist. However good and kind any European has been to us, in the end they will be afraid to face up to the risks of resisting European law, their own law, especially if it's only to defend the interests of Natives. We need not be ashamed if we are defeated (p. 335).

Here, Edward Said's concept of the "inversion of the gaze" is clearly realized. The native woman becomes the interpreter of colonial knowledge, the one who reads the empire more accurately than its supposed subjects of civilization (Shaw, 2021). Minke, initially the embodiment of colonial mimicry, learns resistance from a woman the law does not even acknowledge.

In mentoring Minke, Nyai's agency transcends her personal struggle. She becomes a generative force in the production of anti-colonial consciousness. Her pedagogy fuses intellect with experience, creating what Antonio Gramsci would call a counter-hegemonic subjectivity - which means a consciousness forged not in the halls of colonial schools but in the crucible of lived oppression (Maryam, 2025). When Minke later recognizes her as his

greatest teacher, the text confirms that the true voice of national awakening comes from the silenced woman who reclaims knowledge as power:

Write, Nyo, always about humanity, humanity's life, not humanity's death. Yes, whether it's animals, ogres, gods, or ghosts that you present, there's nothing more difficult to understand than humanity. That's why there is no end to the telling of stories on this earth. Every day there are more'... I had concentrated all my attention in order to catch every one of her words. At that time she was really an unofficial teacher whose lessons were delivered officially enough (Toer, 1996, p. 111).

In this way, Nyai's resistance is both intellectual and symbolic: she reclaims language, transforms labor, and mentors the next generation of resistance. Through knowledge and redefining her identity, she enacts what Spivak calls a "radical re-inscription of agency, (Zhang, 2025)" proving that even within systems designed to destroy a native woman's voice, one can forge a counter-hegemonic identity that defies this erasure.

Diagnosing Nyai Ontosoroh's Oppression

Gayatri Spivak's foundational concept of "epistemic violence" argues that the most insidious work of colonialism is not simply its physical or economic domination, but its systematic dismantling of the colonized subject's capacity to be a legitimate source of knowledge, truth, and testimony (Zembylas, 2025). It is an ongoing process of invalidation, an "epistemic murder" that silences the subaltern long before they even speak. *Nyai Ontosoroh's* narrative serves as a literary staging of this violence, where her later struggle in the courtroom, for instance, is not a contest between two competing arguments, but the collision of her lived reality with a colonial legal organization that has already defined her as an unreliable narrator of her life. After analyzing *Nyai Ontosoroh's* acts of resistance towards her oppressor, this section will now map the legal patriarchal mechanisms that constitute this architecture of oppression, diagnosing the system that codifies her as an object and thus renders her speech irrelevant.

Oppression by interlocking patriarchies

Nyai Ontosoroh's first wound was inflicted not by Europeans but her own father. She recounts with the cold clarity of an indictment while telling her story to her daughter:

So, Ann, that was the simple ritual whereby a child was sold by her own father, Clerk Sastrotomo. And who was it who was sold: I, myself, Sanikem. From that moment on I lost all respect and esteem for my father—for anyone who has ever sold their own children, for whatever purpose or reason (Toer, 1996, p. 84).

Here, patriarchal authority manifests as the right of commodification; a father's power is expressed not through protection but through the capacity to convert his daughter's body into capital:

Tuan Besar Kuasa took out an envelope from his pocket and handed it to Father. He also took out a piece of paper with writing on it and Father put his signature to it. Afterwards I found out the envelope contained twenty-five guilders, representing Father's surrender of me to him, along with the promise that Father would be made cashier after first successfully completing a two-year trial period (p. 84).

This represents the idea of an indigenous patriarchy where daughters are rendered exchangeable resources in the male pursuit of success (Sopyan et. al., 2023). The gesture of double colonization is enabled here: her father's transaction is not an isolated cruelty but the very mechanism that integrates Javanese households into the economy of European concubinage, making this system a direct conduit to the other. This moment of her realization situates indigenous patriarchy as the first accomplice to colonial exploitation.

If Javanese patriarchy provides the initial wound, European domestic patriarchy institutionalizes it as a permanent state of legal non-being. The category of *nyai* is the domestic face of this colonial power: a woman who builds a household, bears children, and manages a vast enterprise, yet remains a phantom (Herlina and Munawara, 2025). *Nyai* herself articulates this paradox of being indispensable in practice but nonexistent in the law in a brief conversation with Minke after learning she will lose everything:

She more than just understood. She was going to lose everything: her child, her business, all the fruits of her efforts, and her personal property. 'Yes, Minke, child, Nyo, we will fight back,' whispered Mama. And all of a sudden she looked old, and walked dispiritedly upstairs...(Toer, 1996, p. 331-332).

The intimate space thus becomes, in Ann Laura Stoler's (2023) terms, a main site for the "politics of intimacy," where a woman's labor creates a household's economic foundation while her lack of status ensures all capital accrues to men. This brutal asymmetry is also intensified by Herman Mellema's personal decline, which shows how patriarchy functions on both a personal and structural level. Even as he abandons her and their children, *Nyai* remains legally bound to him, a concubine whose children carry his name but not hers:

However, the court's decision also meant that the law no longer recognized you as my children. You weren't my children any longer, though it was I who gave birth to you. Since that day, both of you, according to the law, were the children of Mr. Mellema alone—according to the law, Ann, Dutch law in these Indies. Don't be mistaken. You're still my child. Only then did I realize how evil the law was. You obtained a father, but lost a mother (Toer, 1996, p. 93).

Her motherhood is recognized biologically but erased juridically; her love, labor, and loyalty generated wealth and family, but the colonial-patriarchal order grants her no legitimate claim to either.

Nyai's oppression cannot be separated into "native" versus "colonial" categories. Instead, her story reveals her sinister symbiosis. Her father's betrayal shows how indigenous

patriarchy can function as the gateway to colonial exploitation, while Herman Mellema's household transforms her into a legal non-entity despite her centrality to family and business.

Altogether, these interlocking patriarchal narratives perform the act of epistemic violence that precedes the courtroom - a systematic and continuous refusal to recognize *Nyai*'s consent, her labor, motherhood, or voice as legitimate. In the eyes of both the Javanese patriarch and the European master, *Nyai* is rendered not a subject with rights, but an object of transaction.

Oppression by the colonial state

The Dutch colonial project in the East Indies relied on a rigid legal and social hierarchy to maintain its authority - a system that explicitly codified the inferiority of the indigenous population (Allen et. al., 2025). For a native woman like *Nyai* Ontosoroh, this system functioned to erase her legal personhood and reduce her to a racialized and sexualized object. Nowhere is this process of erasure more vividly staged than in the courtroom scenes in chapter 16 that dominate the novel's climax:

The questioning of *Nyai* Ontosoroh, who had become the star of the trial, made her go scarlet. She was not allowed to use Dutch and ordered to use Javanese. She refused, and used Malay (Toer, 1996, p. 279).

These proceedings are not a neutral adjudication of facts but a theater of colonial power, a space where Spivak's "epistemic violence" is made brutally concrete. The court's first tactic is to control the very language of testimony, demonstrating how the court disciplines the register of credible speech (Sofi, 2024). By denying her the use of Dutch - the language of law and power at that time - and insisting on a "native" tongue, the court attempts to confine her subjectivity to a domain it already deems less rational and less credible. As Spivak (2009) argues, to be the object of another's discourse is to be deprived of authority over one's own representation; here, language is the primary instrument of *Nyai*'s disqualification.

Beyond controlling the medium of speech, the court also weaponizes public humiliation to discipline *Nyai* through racial and gendered stereotypes:

The next question was flung at *Nyai* Ontosoroh: *Nyai* Ontosoroh, alias Sanikem, concubine of the late Mr. Herman Mellema: 'How could *Nyai* allow such improper relations between *Nyai*'s guest and *Nyai*'s child?' The surging laughter became more exuberant, more insulting, more demonstrative. The prosecutor, and the judge too, both smiled, pleased that they had been able to engage in the torment of the spirit of this Native woman, a woman envied by so many Pure and Indo of her own sex (Toer, 1996, p. 286).

The prosecutor, in this passage, provoked the courtroom's laughter and framed *Nyai* as an immoral figure. This interrogation racializes sexuality by implying the colonial stereotype of the concubine as a loose, transactional woman. Homi Bhabha's (2021) work on colonial discourse helps explain this condition: the court both depends on and disavows the *nyai*, making her visible as a source of scandal to justify European moral superiority while making her invisible as a human being with legal rights.

This is then codified by the law's bureaucratic logic, which completes the erasure of her personhood. The decision from the Amsterdam District Court treats guardianship as a matter of documentary inventory (Anggraeni and Suwarti, 2023), literalizing the colonizing epistemology where human relationships are reduced to entries on a ledger. As Minke observes:

I felt as if I was about to faint as I read those official documents with their strange language. I could, however, understand one aspect of their contents very well: They looked upon human beings as no more than items in an inventory (Toer, 1996, p. 324).

Nyai's own realization also shows how colonial legal categories sever relationships from juridical recognition: "Only then did I realize how evil the law was. You obtained a father, but lost a mother". (p. 90) In line with Frantz Fanon's account of colonial subjecthood, her maternal labor is morally legible but unintelligible, resulting in a total gendered dispossession (Jilani, 2024).

The proceedings make explicit that the law's main function is not justice but the enforcement of a racial hierarchy:

She was forced to admit that Annelies was not a Native, but an Indo. And the prosecutor's voice thundered furiously: "She is an Indo, an Indo, she's above you! Minke is a Native, though with *forum privilegiatum*, the right to appear before this court, meaning he's above you, *Nyai*, but his *forum* can be canceled at a moment's notice. But Miss Annelies remains above Natives forever (Toer, 1996, p. 287).

The prosecutor's declaration that *Nyai's* daughter, Annelies, is an Indo is a stark inscription of race into legal standing. As Petersen and Rutherford (1986) argue, colonial modernity is a project of identity production; the court's rulings do not just recognize social facts but also produce a racial order where statuses confer legal superiority. This enforcement, as a matter of fact, culminates in the final stage of epistemic dispossession: administrative and spatial exile (Berenstein et. al., 2022). The prosecutor's declaration that *Nyai's* daughter, Annelies, is an Indo is a stark inscription of race into legal standing. As Petersen and Rutherford (1986) argue, colonial modernity is a project of identity production; the court's rulings do not merely recognize social facts but actively produce a racial hierarchy in which legal status determines social value. This process culminates in the final stage of epistemic dispossession: administrative and spatial displacement (Berenstein et al., 2022). The order to deport Annelies to the Netherlands is therefore not merely a logistical transfer but an act of spatial ordering, whereby colonial authority reorganizes people according to imperial geographies that privilege the metropole over the colony. As Stoler (2023) observes, colonial rule extended beyond political domination into the regulation of intimate life and social space, using legal and administrative practices to reinforce racial hierarchies and imperial authority. By relocating Annelies to the metropole, the colonial state severs her from the local relationships, histories, and maternal claims that gave meaning to her identity, ensuring that colonial law (not lived experience) becomes the ultimate arbiter of kinship and belonging. Despite the overwhelming systemic violence, *Nyai* Ontosoroh refuses to be silent:

Europeans are able to purchase Native women just as I was purchased. Are such purchases truer than pure love? If Europeans can act in these ways because of their superior wealth and power, why is it that a Native must become the target of scorn and insults because of pure love? (Toer, 1996, p. 287).

Her insistence on speaking Dutch and her defiant question to the court are powerful acts of epistemic counter-conduct (Waluyo et. al., 2021). They are intentional attempts to re-author her subjectivity and force the court to hear an alternative account of kinship and value. However, as Spivak contends, the subaltern can speak, but the power structures usually guarantee that this speech will be misread or ignored. *Nyai's* address exposes the court's hypocrisy, yet the institutional machinery proceeds unchanged.

Reading these scenes through the notion of epistemic violence, we see that *Nyai's* subjection is not just physical or economic; it is juridical and absolute. The colonial state produces *Nyai* as an object - a non-authoritative writer of her life - and thereby forecloses the possibility that her claims can be heard on equal terms.

Her speech, when it insists on being heard, becomes an occasion for both disclosure and erasure (Niekerk, 2023). She reveals the violence of the empire precisely at the moment the legal apparatus absorbs and nullifies the exposure. This demonstrates the tragic paradox of the subaltern who can speak, but cannot be heard.

Subaltern Agency in Contestation: The Silence that Speaks

In the aftermath of the trial and the verdict on Annelies, Toer's novel returns to the quiet devastation of *Nyai* Ontosoroh and Minke, a silence more potent than any courtroom declaration. The book's closing movements record not simply *Nyai's* defeat but her awareness of the inescapable logic of colonial and patriarchal power:

They can't stand seeing Natives not being trodden under their feet. Natives must always be in the wrong, Europeans must be innocent, so therefore Natives must be wrong to start with. To be born a Native is to be in the wrong. We're facing a more difficult situation now, Minke, my son (Toer, 1996, p. 278).

In this statement, *Nyai* articulates the internalization of epistemic violence. She, as a subaltern, is pre-emptively defined as guilty, irrational, and inferior within the colonial system (Afrika, 2024). Even her understanding of justice is colonized because the colonial framework has already rendered her reason illegible. Her phrase, "to be born Native is to be in the wrong" thus becomes both diagnosis and prophecy - a recognition that her defeat is structural and not personal. Yet Toer refuses to leave *Nyai's* silence as mere submission. Her surrender after Annelie's deportation embodies what Bhabha describes as the "ambivalence of colonial mimicry": the moment when resistance and subjection coexist (Bhabha, 2021).

Nyai's surrender is not empty, it is a political one - the sound of a woman who has spoken truth to a system that cannot hear her. The colonial court's "impudent" exposure to her private life, when the prosecutor "deliberately wanted to turn our lives inside out in public" (Toer, 1996, p. 286), is the performance of what Spivak calls the "non-recognition of subaltern speech." By forcing her to articulate herself only in the languages and categories of her oppressors - Javanese, Malay, concubine, Native - the law changes her from a subject

into evidence. In this case, her body, her motherhood, and her moral virtue all become the terrain which colonial reason proves its superiority.

This silencing exposes the double colonization *Nyai* bears - as a woman and as a native. Within both systems, she is an object of exchange, first by her father's sale and later by Europe's law. But in Toer's narrative design, this defeat becomes a site of resistance. As Said reminds us, colonial discourse depends on the representation of the colonized as passive, yet *Nyai's* endurance, her labor, and her unyielding moral clarity fracture that illusion. The tragedy, then, lies not in *Nyai's* voicelessness but the deafness of a society that can recognize neither her labor nor her love - as we observe in the last scene of the novel:

The sound of the carriage wheels grinding over the gravel could be faintly heard fading away into the distance, finally disappearing. Annelies was setting sail for where Queen Wilhelmina sat on the throne. Behind the door, we bowed our heads.

'We've been defeated, Mama,' I whispered.

'We fought back, child, Nyo, as well and honorably as possible'

Her final silence, therefore, becomes its own form of a notable testimony. It is an indictment of a colonial-patriarchal order so absolute that it must destroy the family to preserve its own fictions of justice. The epistemic violence is thus complete: the court does not merely silence her voice but nullifies the reality her voice sought to defend. Yet, in this act of erasure, the system paradoxically ensures her legacy. While the law may have claimed her daughter, it is *Nyai's* voice that Minke inherits. This transforms her personal defeat into the foundation of a future revolution.

The Inheritance of a Silenced Voice

I have argued in this essay that the trajectory of *Nyai Ontosoroh*, from a commodified child-bride to the matriarch of Buitenzorg, serves as Toer's most notable exploration of subaltern agency under the crushing weight of double colonization. My analysis has sought to demonstrate that she is subjugated not by a single force, but by the symbiotic violence of a racist colonial state and the interlocking patriarchies of both Javanese and European society. In the face of this, this paper contends that *Nyai* forged a potent counter-hegemony, weaponizing the colonizer's language and commerce to construct an identity of authority even as a concubine. Her legal defeat is not a mark of failure in her voice, but a definitive staging of epistemic violence. It is a demonstration that the colonial system is designed not merely to rule but also to disregard the history and reality of those it governs.

The significance of this reading extends far beyond a literary analysis of a single character. By centering *Nyai*, I hope to have complicated simplistic narratives of colonial victimhood, to reveal instead a landscape where oppression coexists with fierce, calculated resistance. I also emphasized the centrality of female agency to anti-colonial thought, where the battles waged in the home, the marketplace, and the courtroom are as fundamental to the struggle for liberation as the political manifestos written by men. I believe *Nyai's* narrative serves as a historical analogue for the ways in which legal and bureaucratic systems continue to disenfranchise marginalized voices even today, proving that the architecture of epistemic violence is a durable and enduring legacy of the empire.

This Earth of Mankind, therefore, solidifies its position as an essential text for postcolonial feminism. It is more than a narrative of oppression; it is a testament to the generative power of a subaltern voice, even one that is silenced by the machinery of a state. Toer's masterpiece does not offer easy victories, but instead gives readers something more enduring. It is the celebration of the indomitable spirit of resistance that persists even as it unflinchingly portrays the brutal structural forces aligned against it. It is necessary, then, to keep in mind what *Nyai* said: "I must be strong...All the devils and demons have encircled me."

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Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author used OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5.5) solely as a writing and editorial assistance tool during the preparation of this manuscript. The AI was used to assist in improving the organization of quotations, checking the consistency of in-text citations and references, refining the language of selected passages, and enhancing the overall clarity of the manuscript. All interpretations, arguments, analyses, and conclusions presented in this article are the author's own. The author carefully reviewed, verified, and took full responsibility for all content included in the final manuscript.