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Islamic Discourse and Gender Inequality in Colonial Java:
A Feminist Reading of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Gadis Pantai*

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ABSTRACT

While existing scholarship predominantly examines gender stratification and feudal structures in *Gadis Pantai*, limited attention has been paid to how Islamic discourse functioned as an ideological apparatus legitimizing patriarchal domination in early 20th-century Javanese coastal society. This study addresses the intersectionality of religion, social class, and gender oppression, examining how Islam served not merely as spiritual foundation but as a tool reinforcing patriarchal power structures. The research aims to deconstruct the relationship between Javanese Islamic practices, feudal hierarchy, and gender subordination through character analysis, particularly Bendoro (the priyayi religious teacher) and *Gadis Pantai* (representing marginalized wong cilik women). Employing qualitative literary analysis with postcolonial feminist theory, specifically Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern framework, combined with historical contextualization, this study analyzes Pramoedya's novel alongside scholarly sources from Google Scholar. Findings reveal that Pramoedya presents Javanese Islam as an ambivalent social discourse: while containing moral and spiritual values, it simultaneously legitimized patriarchal authority and social inequality in traditional society. This research contributes to understanding how religious discourse intersects with power relations and gender oppression in postcolonial Indonesian literature, offering critical insights for contemporary gender justice movements and Islamic feminism discourse in Southeast Asian contexts.

ABSTRAK

Meskipun kajian terdahulu dominan mengkaji stratifikasi gender dan struktur feodal dalam *Gadis Pantai*, perhatian terbatas diberikan pada bagaimana wacana Islam berfungsi sebagai aparatus ideologis yang melegitimasi dominasi patriarkal di masyarakat pesisir Jawa awal abad ke-20. Penelitian ini mengkaji interseksionalitas agama, kelas sosial, dan penindasan gender, menelaah bagaimana Islam tidak hanya menjadi landasan spiritual tetapi juga alat memperkuat struktur kekuasaan patriarkal. Tujuan penelitian untuk mendekonstruksi relasi antara praktik Islam Jawa, hierarki feodal, dan subordinasi gender melalui analisis tokoh, khususnya Bendoro (*priyayi*, guru agama) dan *Gadis Pantai* (representasi perempuan *wong cilik* termarginalkan). Menggunakan analisis sastra kualitatif dengan teori feminisme poskolonial, khususnya kerangka subaltern Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, dikombinasikan dengan kontekstualisasi historis, penelitian ini menganalisis novel Pramoedya bersama sumber akademik dari Google Scholar. Temuan menunjukkan Pramoedya menghadirkan Islam Jawa sebagai wacana sosial yang ambivalen: meski mengandung nilai moral dan spiritual, namun secara bersamaan melegitimasi otoritas patriarkal dan ketimpangan sosial dalam masyarakat tradisional. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman bagaimana wacana religius bersinggungan dengan relasi kuasa dan penindasan gender dalam sastra poskolonial Indonesia, menawarkan wawasan kritis bagi gerakan keadilan gender kontemporer dan diskursus feminisme Islam di konteks Asia Tenggara.

PRELIMINARY

The intersection of religion, gender, and social hierarchy in colonial and postcolonial societies has produced complex systems of oppression that extend far beyond political domination. In early twentieth-century Java, the confluence of indigenous feudalism, Islamic practice, and Dutch colonial administration created a uniquely stratified social order where women, particularly those from lower social classes, experienced multiple, intersecting forms of subordination. Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *Gadis Pantai* (1987), based on his grandmother's life story, portrays a fourteen-year-old girl from a fishing village who becomes a "practice wife" (*istri percobaan*) to a *priyayi* nobleman, revealing how feudal and patriarchal circumstances shaped female identity in colonial Java (Sofi, 2018; Bangsawan, 2017). This historical context provides crucial insights into the mechanisms through which religious discourse, social status, and gender norms operated as interlocking systems of control in Indonesian coastal communities during the colonial period.

The relevance of examining historical gender inequalities has intensified in light of current global efforts toward gender equality, particularly within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). According to the United Nations, the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030, with none of the 18 SDG 5 indicators having met or almost met their targets (United Nations, 2025). At current rates of progress, achieving equal representation in national parliaments could take until 2063, while closing gaps in legal protection and removing discriminatory laws may require up to 286 years (United Nations, 2025). The 2024 Gender Snapshot reveals that not a single indicator under SDG 5 has been fully achieved, and ending extreme poverty among women could take 137 more years at the current rate of change (UN Women, 2024). These sobering statistics underscore the urgency of understanding how patriarchal systems, often legitimized through religious and cultural frameworks, continue to impede women's empowerment globally. Literary analysis of historical texts like *Gadis Pantai* offers critical insights into the deep-rooted structures that perpetuate gender inequality across generations.

While existing scholarship on *Gadis Pantai* has extensively examined gender stratification and feudal hierarchies, a significant research gap persists regarding the specific function of Islamic discourse as an ideological apparatus in legitimizing patriarchal domination. Previous studies have focused on postcolonial readings emphasizing women's agency and resistance, or analyzed the novel through Marxist frameworks highlighting class oppression (Obst, 2024; Chipango, 2025; Peters, et al., 2025). However, limited scholarly attention has been paid to how Javanese Islamic practices, embodied in rituals, spatial organization, and religious symbolism, operated not merely as spiritual practices but as tools for reinforcing class distinctions and gender subordination. Recent postcolonial feminist scholarship reveals that traditional patriarchal readings of religious texts stem from socio-historical contexts rather than inherent textual mandates, with colonial influences intensifying hierarchical structures (Ahmad, et al., 2025; Lauri, et al., 2023; Rahawarin, 2024). This research addresses this gap by interrogating how Bendoro, as both *priyayi* and religious teacher, deploys Islamic symbols and practices to consolidate his authority over *Gadis Pantai*, transforming religious piety into a mechanism of social control.

The urgency of this study extends beyond academic discourse to contemporary global struggles for gender justice within Muslim-majority societies and diaspora communities. Islamic feminism in modern contexts challenges patriarchal norms through reinterpretations of religious texts, empowering women to advocate for their rights within religious and legal frameworks despite facing persistent barriers (Hassan, 2025; Roggeband, et al., 2025). Scholars such as Amina Wadud have advocated for inclusive and egalitarian understandings of Islam, with this shift influenced by increased access to education, globalization, and digital communication technologies facilitating transnational networks of feminist solidarity (Chatterjee, 2024; Linao, et al., 2024). Understanding historical precedents of how Islamic discourse has been instrumentalized to justify gender inequality provides essential context for contemporary Islamic feminist movements seeking to disentangle patriarchy from religious tradition. The task of elaborating rigorous discourse on gender equality in Islam that includes equality in the family and disentangles patriarchy from Islam fell to Islamic feminists of the late twentieth century (Badran, 2010), making historical literary analysis of texts like *Gadis Pantai* crucial for tracing the genealogy of these struggles.

This research aligns with critical global trends in postcolonial and decolonial feminist scholarship that interrogate the complicity of religious institutions in perpetuating gender-based violence and discrimination. Recent scholarship advances decolonial thinking "after rights", signaling an epistemic

commitment to confronting the limits of juridical rights and their complicity in exclusion and dispossession, with the aim of cultivating more just and inclusive forms of world-making (Jaber, 2025). Postcolonial feminist theorizing has critiqued the Western liberal feminist impulse to rescue Third World women from oppressive cultural practices, calling for recognition of how colonial legacies shape contemporary gender relations in formerly colonized societies (Rathnam, 2024). The analysis of *Gadis Pantai* contributes to this theoretical conversation by demonstrating how indigenous patriarchal structures and colonial modernity intersected in early twentieth-century Java, producing hybrid forms of oppression that cannot be understood through singular analytical frameworks.

Furthermore, the novel's representation of coastal society offers insights into the often-overlooked dynamics of periphery communities in Javanese social history. While scholarship on Javanese Islam has predominantly focused on courtly and urban contexts, coastal communities occupied liminal spaces where maritime trade, Islamic networks, and colonial administration converged in distinctive ways. The marriage between Bendoro and Gadis Pantai symbolizes not only class transgression but also the incorporation of coastal populations into *priyayi* hierarchies through mechanisms that combined Islamic legitimacy with feudal authority. This intersection reveals how religious discourse functioned as a "civilizing" project that transformed "rough" coastal women into "refined" noblewomen, effectively erasing their autonomous identities while claiming to elevate their social status.

By employing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern alongside historical contextualization of Javanese Islam, this study offers an interdisciplinary framework for understanding how literary texts archive social relations often obscured in official historical records (Suryawati, et al., 2021; Kurni, et al., 2023). Pramoedya's humanist project, evident throughout his oeuvre, positions literature as a vehicle for recovering marginalized voices and critiquing power structures (Pamungkas, et al., 2021; Hun, 2025). The analysis reveals that *Gadis Pantai* functions as both historical documentation and ethical intervention: it exposes how Islamic piety, when enmeshed with feudal privilege, produces systems of domination while simultaneously gesturing toward alternative possibilities for women's agency and resistance. This dual function makes the novel particularly valuable for contemporary readers seeking to understand the historical roots of ongoing struggles for gender justice in Muslim-majority postcolonial contexts.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis with an interdisciplinary approach integrating postcolonial feminist theory, historical contextualization, and cultural studies methodologies. The research design follows a critical interpretive paradigm, positioning literary texts as cultural artifacts that both reflect and construct social realities (Kuntowijoyo, 1994). This methodological framework is particularly suited to examining how ideological structures, specifically Islamic discourse and patriarchal authority, operate within narrative representations of early twentieth-century Javanese coastal society. The study's interpretive nature allows for deep textual engagement while maintaining analytical rigor through systematic application of theoretical frameworks and triangulation with historical scholarship.

The research adopts a library research (*library research*) methodology (Assingily, 2021), chosen for its appropriateness in analyzing published literary works and their socio-historical contexts. This approach enables comprehensive examination of textual evidence alongside scholarly discourse without requiring primary data collection from human subjects. The methodology aligns with established practices in literary and cultural studies where texts themselves constitute legitimate objects of inquiry, particularly when investigating historical phenomena inaccessible through empirical observation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The analytical framework combines close reading techniques from literary criticism with discourse analysis to unpack how language, symbols, and narrative structures encode power relations.

Data Sources

The primary data source for this research is Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *Gadis Pantai* (1987), published by Hasta Mitra, Jakarta. The complete novel text serves as the corpus for textual analysis, with particular attention to passages depicting: (1) interactions between Bendoro and Gadis Pantai that reveal power dynamics; (2) descriptions of Islamic rituals, symbols, and spatial arrangements; (3) representations of social stratification between *priyayi* and *wong cilik* classes; and (4) narrative moments that illuminate

gender subordination mechanisms. The selection of this specific text is justified by its historical setting in early twentieth-century coastal Java, its explicit engagement with religious authority and gender relations, and Pramoedya's stated biographical connection to the narrative, which grounds the fictional account in lived historical experience (Toer, 2000).

Secondary data sources comprise scholarly literature retrieved through systematic database searches in Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Web of Science, focusing on peer-reviewed journal articles and academic monographs published between 1960 and 2025. The literature review encompasses five thematic categories: (1) Postcolonial feminist theory, particularly works by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on subaltern women (Spivak, 1985) and intersectional analyses of gender, class, and colonialism; (2) Javanese Islamic studies, including foundational anthropological works by Geertz (1960), Ricklefs (2006), Woodward (1989), and Hefner (2000) that theorize the relationship between Islamic practice, *priyayi* culture, and social hierarchy; (3) Indonesian literary criticism, specifically studies analyzing Pramoedya's oeuvre and *Gadis Pantai* in particular (Puspita & Nasir, 2019; Azwar et al., 2020; Agnibaya & Dhikapuspitasari, 2024; Liliani, 2004); (4) Historical scholarship on colonial Java, gender relations, and coastal societies (Carey, 2008; Moertono, 1985; Steenbrink, 1993); and (5) Contemporary gender studies addressing SDG 5 implementation and Islamic feminism to establish contemporary relevance.

Search strategies employed combinations of keywords including "Gadis Pantai," "Pramoedya Ananta Toer," "Javanese Islam," "gender inequality," "postcolonial feminism," "*priyayi* culture," "coastal society Java," and "patriarchal discourse." Inclusion criteria required sources to: (a) directly address theoretical frameworks relevant to the study; (b) provide historical or cultural context for early twentieth-century Java; (c) offer previous literary analyses of the novel; or (d) establish connections to contemporary gender justice discourse. Exclusion criteria eliminated sources lacking academic rigor, those focused exclusively on Pramoedya's other works without theoretical transferability, and non-English or non-Indonesian language materials beyond the researchers' linguistic competencies. This resulted in a corpus of 35 scholarly sources forming the analytical foundation.

Analytical Framework

The study employs Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern theory (1985) as its primary theoretical lens, specifically examining how the character *Gadis Pantai* represents the doubly-marginalized position of women who are silenced both by colonial power structures and indigenous patriarchal systems (Suryawati et al., 2021). Spivak's concept of "epistemic violence", the erasure of subaltern voices through dominant discourse, provides a framework for analyzing how Islamic religious discourse in the novel functions to render *Gadis Pantai*'s subjectivity invisible while positioning Bendoro's authority as natural and divinely sanctioned. This theoretical approach enables examination of how gendered and classed forms of oppression intersect within religious and cultural contexts.

The analysis integrates historical methodology following Kuntowijoyo's (1994) approach to historical research, which emphasizes contextualization of literary texts within their specific socio-political moments. This involves tracing historical dimensions of Javanese social structures, Islamic practice in coastal communities, and colonial influence on indigenous hierarchies during the early twentieth century. Historical contextualization prevents ahistorical readings while grounding textual interpretation in documented social realities. Additionally, the study employs literary psychology approaches (Wulandari & Parmin, 2025) to examine character construction and the psychological dimensions of power relations depicted in the narrative, bridging textual analysis with social-historical understanding.

The analytical procedure follows four systematic stages: (1) Close textual reading identifying key passages related to Islamic discourse, gender relations, and social hierarchy; (2) Discourse analysis examining how language, symbols, and narrative structures encode power relations, with particular attention to religious terminology, spatial metaphors, and characterization strategies; (3) Theoretical interpretation applying Spivak's subaltern framework and historical scholarship on Javanese Islam to decode ideological operations within the text; and (4) Synthesis connecting textual findings to broader patterns of patriarchal legitimation and contemporary gender justice concerns. This multi-stage process ensures analytical rigor while maintaining interpretive depth.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure trustworthiness in qualitative literary analysis, the study employs several validation strategies. Theoretical triangulation involves applying multiple analytical lenses (postcolonial feminism, historical analysis, literary criticism) to the same textual evidence, comparing interpretations for consistency and identifying tensions that enrich understanding. Source triangulation cross-references textual interpretations with historical scholarship, anthropological studies of Javanese culture, and existing literary criticism to verify plausibility and avoid idiosyncratic readings. Prolonged engagement with the primary text through multiple complete readings and focused analysis of specific passages ensures interpretive depth rather than superficial treatment.

Reflexivity is maintained through explicit acknowledgment of the researchers' positionality as contemporary scholars examining historical gender oppression, recognizing how present-day feminist commitments inform, but do not predetermine, analytical conclusions. The study employs thick description (Geertz, 1973) in presenting textual evidence, providing sufficient context and detail to enable readers to assess interpretive validity independently. Peer debriefing among the research team and consultation with experts in Indonesian literature, Islamic studies, and gender studies provide external validation of analytical claims. These measures collectively enhance the study's credibility, transferability, and confirmability according to established qualitative research standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

While this research does not involve human subjects and therefore does not require institutional review board approval, several ethical considerations guide the study. First, intellectual honesty requires accurate representation of Pramoedya's text without distortion to fit predetermined interpretive agendas, even while applying critical theoretical frameworks. All quotations are contextualized appropriately, and alternative interpretations acknowledged where scholarly debate exists. Second, cultural sensitivity informs the analysis of Islamic practices, avoiding orientalist stereotyping while maintaining critical distance necessary for scholarly inquiry. The study distinguishes between critiquing patriarchal instrumentalization of religion and criticizing Islam itself, recognizing the difference between theological principles and their social deployment.

Third, responsible representation of marginalized voices guides discussion of Gadis Pantai's subaltern position, avoiding the problematic dynamic Spivak warns against wherein Western-educated scholars claim to "speak for" the subaltern while paradoxically silencing them. The analysis maintains awareness that literary representation differs from lived experience, and Pramoedya's male authorial perspective shapes the narrative in ways that may reproduce certain patriarchal assumptions even while critiquing others. Fourth, academic integrity ensures proper attribution of all sources, transparent methodology enabling replication or contestation by other researchers, and modest claims appropriately bounded by the study's scope and limitations. Finally, social responsibility motivates the research toward contributing to contemporary gender justice discourse without presenting historical analysis as prescriptive blueprint for current activism, recognizing the complexity of translating scholarly insights into practical interventions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Pramoedya's Humanist Vision and the Gendered Critique in *Gadis Pantai*

Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925-2006) emerged as one of Indonesia's most significant literary voices, whose oeuvre consistently interrogated power structures, colonial legacies, and social injustices embedded within Indonesian society. Born in Blora, Central Java, into a family with strong educational and Islamic backgrounds, his father was a teacher active in *Boedi Oetomo*, and his maternal grandfather had completed the hajj pilgrimage, Pramoedya's formative experiences shaped his acute sensitivity to social hierarchies and religious hypocrisy (Toer, 2006). His literary career, spanning over five decades despite political imprisonment and censorship, demonstrates a sustained commitment to what Hun (2025) identifies as humanist principles: the belief that human dignity, freedom, and social responsibility transcend ideological and religious boundaries. Pramoedya's humanism manifests in his portrayal of characters struggling for identity, justice, and freedom against colonial oppression and social injustice, emphasizing that being human means being civilized, knowledgeable, courageous, and maintaining dignity and independence, values that reject subordination and oppression.

Gadis Pantai, originally written between 1962-1965 as the first part of a planned trilogy about Pramoedya's own family history, represents a critical intersection of his autobiographical roots and social critique. The novel was published in book form in 1987 after the subsequent volumes were destroyed by the Indonesian Army on October 13, 1965, and later banned by the Attorney General's office for its perceived political subversion (Toer, 2000). Through the story of a young woman from a fishing village forced to marry a *priyayi* nobleman, *Gadis Pantai* presents a powerful portrait of social and gender inequality, becoming one of the most representative works of Pramoedya's humanist spirit and social realism. Pamungkas et al. (2021) argue that Pramoedya's humanist thought unites national and humanitarian dimensions, highlighting social injustice and ideological fanaticism that erodes humanity itself. His approach transforms literature from mere ideological representation into a medium for moral and humanitarian ideas, attempting to reconstruct social order based on humane values. This philosophical foundation undergirds the novel's critique of how religious and cultural frameworks can be co-opted to rationalize oppression, particularly of women and lower classes.

The novel's protagonist, referred to simply as "Gadis Pantai" (Coastal Girl) or "Mas Nganten" (Bride), embodies what Spivak (1985) conceptualizes as the subaltern, subjects whose voices are systematically silenced by intersecting structures of patriarchy, class hierarchy, and colonial modernity. Her namelessness itself signifies epistemic violence: denied individual identity, she exists only in relation to masculine authority (as bride, wife, or discarded woman) and spatial origin (as coastal, thus peripheralized). From the beginning, *Gadis Pantai* has no control over her life; she is made merely a "practice wife" and required to submit entirely to Bendoro's will, without space to refuse or choose. This narrative strategy exposes how patriarchal systems operate not through overt violence alone, but through normalized social practices that render women's subordination invisible and inevitable. The novel thus functions as both historical documentation and ethical intervention, recovering a marginalized voice while critiquing the mechanisms of its silencing.

Social Stratification and Gender Subordination in Javanese Coastal Society

The novel meticulously reconstructs the rigid social hierarchy of early twentieth-century Javanese coastal society, divided between the *priyayi* (aristocratic elite) and *wong cilik* (common people). Social class and religious status became important instruments in determining a person's position, including in gender relations. *Gadis Pantai* comes from a poor fishing family, while Bendoro is a *priyayi* figure possessing economic, social, and religious power. This stratification, as Liliani (2004) demonstrates, manifests through lifestyle markers, language registers, and behavioral codes that function as class signifiers. The *priyayi* are characterized as cultured and refined (*halus*), while *wong cilik* are represented as rough and simple (*kasar*), binaries that naturalize inequality by coding it as cultural difference rather than structural injustice.

The marriage between Bendoro and *Gadis Pantai* exemplifies what Moertono (1985) identifies as patron-client relationships in historical Javanese statecraft, wherein subordinate populations were incorporated into elite structures through mechanisms that combined coercion with symbolic elevation. After being married to Bendoro, *Gadis Pantai*'s life concretely demonstrates how strong the patriarchal system and social stratification were in Javanese coastal culture. She was moved from her fishing village to Bendoro's large house full of rules and social distance. Every step was monitored by servants; even how she sat, walked, and spoke had to conform to *priyayi* etiquette. This transformation process, what might be termed "aristocratization", operates as disciplinary power in Foucauldian terms: not merely repressing the subject's agency but reconstituting her subjectivity according to elite norms. The surveillance by servants, the policing of bodily comportment, and the regulation of speech create what Foucault (1977) calls a "docile body", one that internalizes hierarchical relations as natural and necessary.

The novel's most devastating critique emerges in its depiction of reproductive violence and maternal dispossession. After giving birth to a daughter, she was expelled from Bendoro's house for not providing a male heir, and her child was taken from her without the right to refuse. This scene shows the double oppression experienced by women as *wong cilik* who have no power against the *priyayi* class, and as women whose existence is measured solely by their biological function. This episode reveals the intersectionality of oppression: *Gadis Pantai*'s subordination stems simultaneously from her class position, her gender, and her failure to fulfill patriarchal reproductive expectations. The conflation of women's value with their capacity to produce male heirs, a pattern documented across patriarchal societies globally, achieves particular cruelty when combined with the absolute property rights *priyayi* men exercised over

both wives and children. Puspita & Nasir (2019) observe that *Gadis Pantai* is depicted as weak and inferior, possessing no autonomy over her body or life, while *Bendoro* represents patriarchal power legitimized by social status and religion.

The novel thus exposes what Azwar et al. (2020) identify as a social paradox: while *Gadis Pantai* is considered noble and honorable in her home village due to her marriage to a *priyayi*, she simultaneously experiences real oppression in the domestic sphere. This contradiction reveals how patriarchal systems deploy symbolic recognition strategically, granting women limited public honor precisely to mask their private subjugation. The community's perception of her marriage as socially elevating obscures the material violence of her dispossession, demonstrating how ideology operates to make oppression appear as opportunity. Pramoedya's satirical treatment of this paradox challenges readers to recognize the gap between patriarchal rhetoric (which claims to protect and honor women) and patriarchal practice (which exploits and discards them).

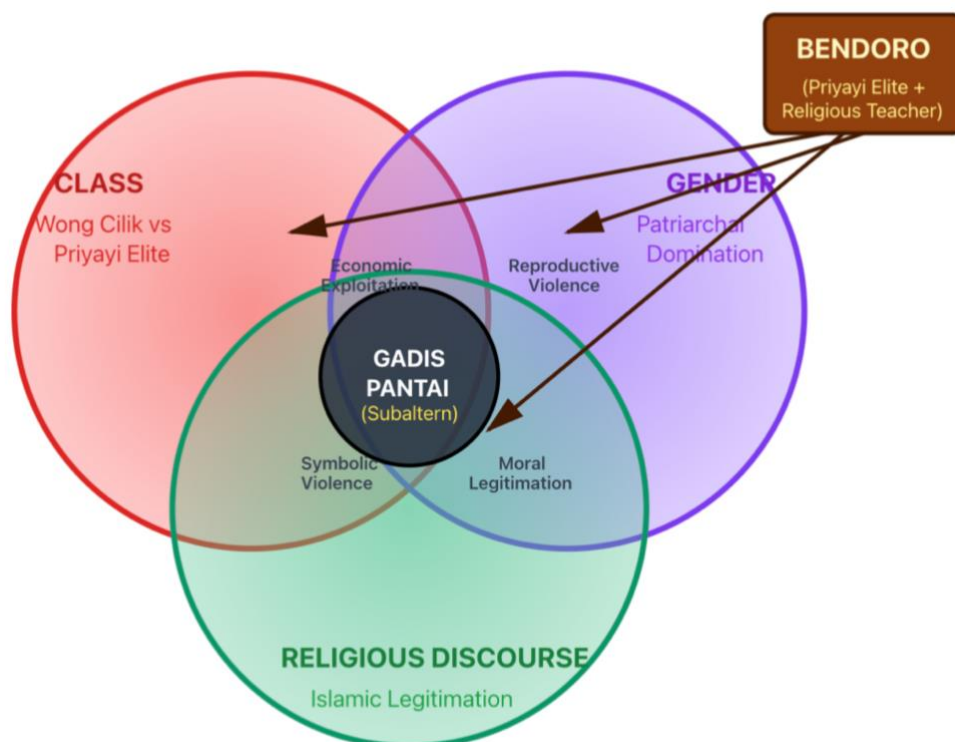


Figure 1. Intersectionality Framework of Oppression in *Gadis Pantai*

Figure 1 illustrates the intersectional framework through which *Gadis Pantai* experiences triple marginalization across class (*wong cilik* vs *priyayi*), gender (patriarchal marriage system), and religious discourse (Islamic legitimation). Positioned at the center of these overlapping domains, *Gadis Pantai* embodies Spivak's (1985) concept of the subaltern, subjects whose voices are systematically silenced by multiple, intersecting structures of oppression. *Bendoro*'s location outside the intersection represents his hegemonic control over all three spheres, deploying his dual status as *priyayi* nobleman and religious teacher to naturalize his authority. The diagram operationalizes the novel's critique of how patriarchy, feudalism, and religious ideology converge to produce and sustain gender inequality in early twentieth-century Javanese coastal society.

Islamic Discourse as Ideological Apparatus: Ritual, Space, and Gendered Authority

The novel's most significant contribution to understanding religion-gender intersections lies in its representation of how Islamic discourse functions as what Assingky & Putri (2022) terms an "ideological state apparatus", a non-coercive mechanism through which dominant classes maintain hegemony. *Bendoro* embodies this dual authority as both *priyayi* nobleman and religious teacher (*guru agama*), a combination that grants him unassailable moral legitimacy. Through the story of a coastal woman married

to a *priyayi* who is simultaneously a religious figure, Pramoedya reveals how power in early 20th-century Javanese society operated through a combination of custom, religion, and social status. This configuration aligns with Geertz's (1960) category of "*priyayi* Islam", religious practice emphasizing etiquette, refinement, and honor, functioning as symbolic capital reinforcing social power.

The novel meticulously catalogs religious symbols and practices that demarcate Bendoro's authority: Qur'anic calligraphy adorning walls, prayer rugs (*mukeneh*), prayer beads (*tasbeeh*), the opened Qur'an in his private chamber (*kehalwat*), and his distinctive turban. When Gadis Pantai enters Bendoro's room filled with Arabic calligraphy frames and is then forced to follow Bendoro's prayer movements, this affirms how Islamic symbols exist not merely as private faith but as markers of honor and tools of social legitimation. These material objects constitute what Bourdieu (1991) calls "symbolic violence", domination that is misrecognized as legitimate authority rather than arbitrary power. The religious artifacts transform Bendoro's personal space into a sacred domain where his will becomes divinely sanctioned, making resistance to his authority not merely social transgression but religious impiety.

Pramoedya's representation of Islamic ritual reveals its function in class reproduction and gender subordination. The ritual practices presented by Pramoedya, such as ablution (*wudu*), Qur'anic recitation gatherings, and the organization of the *kehalwat* space, show ritualistic aspects of Javanese Islam intersecting with local culture. The scene where Gadis Pantai is "taught to take ablution water" and positioned in the *kehalwat* space to imitate Bendoro's movements confirms that ritual there functions simultaneously as moral education and class socialization mechanism: ritual becomes a mechanism for identity transformation (from *wong cilik* to "primary wife") while serving as an instrument of control. This analysis resonates with Woodward's (1989) argument that Javanese Islam possesses its own orthodoxy, what he terms "normative piety", that is formal and respectful but practiced within feudal structures emphasizing class distinction. Religious knowledge becomes gatekept: Gadis Pantai's ignorance of menstrual regulations (*haid*) marks her as spiritually inferior, justifying her subordination as religious education rather than social domination.

The gendering of religious knowledge proves particularly insidious. The gender dimension of religious practice in the novel is very prominent. Concerns about "purity," knowledge about menstruation, and rules for women's behavior become tools of moral and social evaluation; for example, when the village head becomes angry because Gadis Pantai does not yet understand menstruation shows that religio-biological knowledge is politicized in determining the social appropriateness of a wife-daughter-in-law. This biologization of religious knowledge, making women's bodily processes the locus of spiritual purity, operates as what Foucault (1978) analyzes as "bio-power": the regulation of populations through discourses of health, hygiene, and morality. Women's bodies become sites where religious authority inscribes itself, transforming natural processes into moral categories that justify surveillance and control. Hefner (2000) notes that while Javanese Islam contains egalitarian ethical potential, it is frequently co-opted by patron-client systems, precisely the dynamic the novel illustrates through Bendoro's paternalistic authority over Gadis Pantai.

Historical Hybridity: Islam, Modernity, and Coastal Transformation

The novel's setting in coastal Java during the early twentieth century captures a moment of historical transformation when indigenous hierarchies, Islamic networks, and colonial modernity converged in complex hybridities. The presence of foreign material and cultural elements in Bendoro's religious environment, such as electric lighting, floors with "coral" motifs, Chinese porcelain, calligraphic decorations mixed with Chinese motifs, even the practice of Chinese physicians and leeches in healing efforts, indicates historical shifts: the transformation of coastal society from local tradition toward heterogeneous colonial modernity experiences. This material heterogeneity reflects what Ricklefs (2006) terms "mystic synthesis", the blending of Sufi Islam, Javanese aristocratic customs, and local traditions into distinctive cultural formations. However, Pramoedya's representation emphasizes how this synthesis functioned less as egalitarian cultural exchange than as elite appropriation: modernity's artifacts (electricity, imported goods, medical knowledge) become additional markers of *priyayi* distinction rather than democratizing forces.

The novel thus documents what Carey (2008) analyzes regarding colonial Java: how European contact reconfigured social maps and religious practices without dismantling indigenous hierarchies, instead providing new resources through which elites consolidated power. Pramoedya also shows how

modernity (tools, Dutch language, economic networks) entered the religious realm so that Javanese Islamic practice in Bendoro's house mixed with modern/colonial status symbols, forming a hybrid cultural order that became an arena of power struggle. This hybridity proves crucial for understanding contemporary Indonesia: the systems of gender inequality facing Indonesian women today are neither purely "traditional" nor simply "colonial impositions" but rather emerge from historical articulations that the novel helps illuminate. Steenbrink (1993) demonstrates that in 18th-20th century Java, customary/aristocratic elites regularly combined religious symbols to strengthen political authority, while colonial contact transformed social geography and religious practice, precisely the historical substrate *Gadis Pantai* dramatizes.

The coastal setting itself carries analytical significance often overlooked in scholarship focused on courtly or urban Java. Coastal communities occupied liminal spaces where maritime trade, Islamic networks spanning the Indian Ocean world, and colonial administrative penetration created distinctive social formations. The marriage between the aristocratic Bendoro and the fisher-class *Gadis Pantai* symbolizes the incorporation of these peripheralized maritime populations into *priyayi* hierarchies through mechanisms combining Islamic legitimacy with feudal authority. This incorporation operated as what Gramsci (1971) terms "hegemony", domination achieved through consent rather than coercion alone, as coastal families perceived such marriages as social advancement despite their exploitative realities. The novel thus recovers coastal perspectives often marginalized in Java-centric historiography, revealing how gender and class oppression operated distinctively in these maritime contexts.

Ambivalence of Religious Discourse: Moral Resource and Domination Tool

The novel's sophisticated treatment of Islamic discourse resists simplistic anti-religious readings, instead presenting what the research identifies as ambivalence: religion simultaneously contains ethical resources for human dignity while being instrumentalized for oppression. Research findings show that Pramoedya presents Javanese Islam as an ambivalent social discourse field: on one side containing moral and spiritual values, but on the other used to legitimize patriarchal power and social inequality in traditional society. This ambivalence proves crucial for contemporary Islamic feminist movements seeking to disentangle patriarchy from religious tradition. As Abu-Lughod (2013) argues in critiquing Western "rescue narratives" about Muslim women, the challenge lies not in rejecting Islam but in contesting patriarchal interpretations that claim religious authority.

The novel provides evidence for both dimensions of this ambivalence. Islamic ethics inform some characters' conscience and moral reasoning, creating spaces for questioning injustice even within oppressive structures. Yet these same ethical frameworks are deployed by Bendoro to rationalize his treatment of *Gadis Pantai*, her suffering becomes reframed as spiritual education, her dispossession as divine will. Pramoedya uses elements of Javanese Islam, including ritual, symbols, terminology, and religious space, as narrative tools to reveal historical shifts and gender-class power relations in coastal society. The novel offers a dual reading: (1) on the surface, showing custom and religion protecting *priyayi* family honor; (2) in depth, critiquing how religion is used to affirm patriarchal dominance and social stratification. This dual reading strategy invites what Ricoeur (1970) calls a "hermeneutics of suspicion", reading sacred claims critically to expose their worldly investments, without foreclosing possibilities for religious reform.

Contemporary Islamic feminist scholars like Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Fatima Mernissi have developed methodologies for distinguishing scriptural principles from patriarchal interpretations shaped by historical contexts, precisely the analytical move Pramoedya's novel enables through its historical specificity. By situating Islamic discourse within particular class relations and gender politics of early twentieth-century Java, the novel demonstrates that oppressive religious practices reflect socio-historical configurations rather than theological inevitabilities. This insight proves vital for current struggles: understanding that patriarchal Islam in colonial Java served *priyayi* class interests helps contemporary activists argue that gender-just Islamic interpretations are not Western impositions but recoveries of religion's egalitarian potentials from elite distortions.

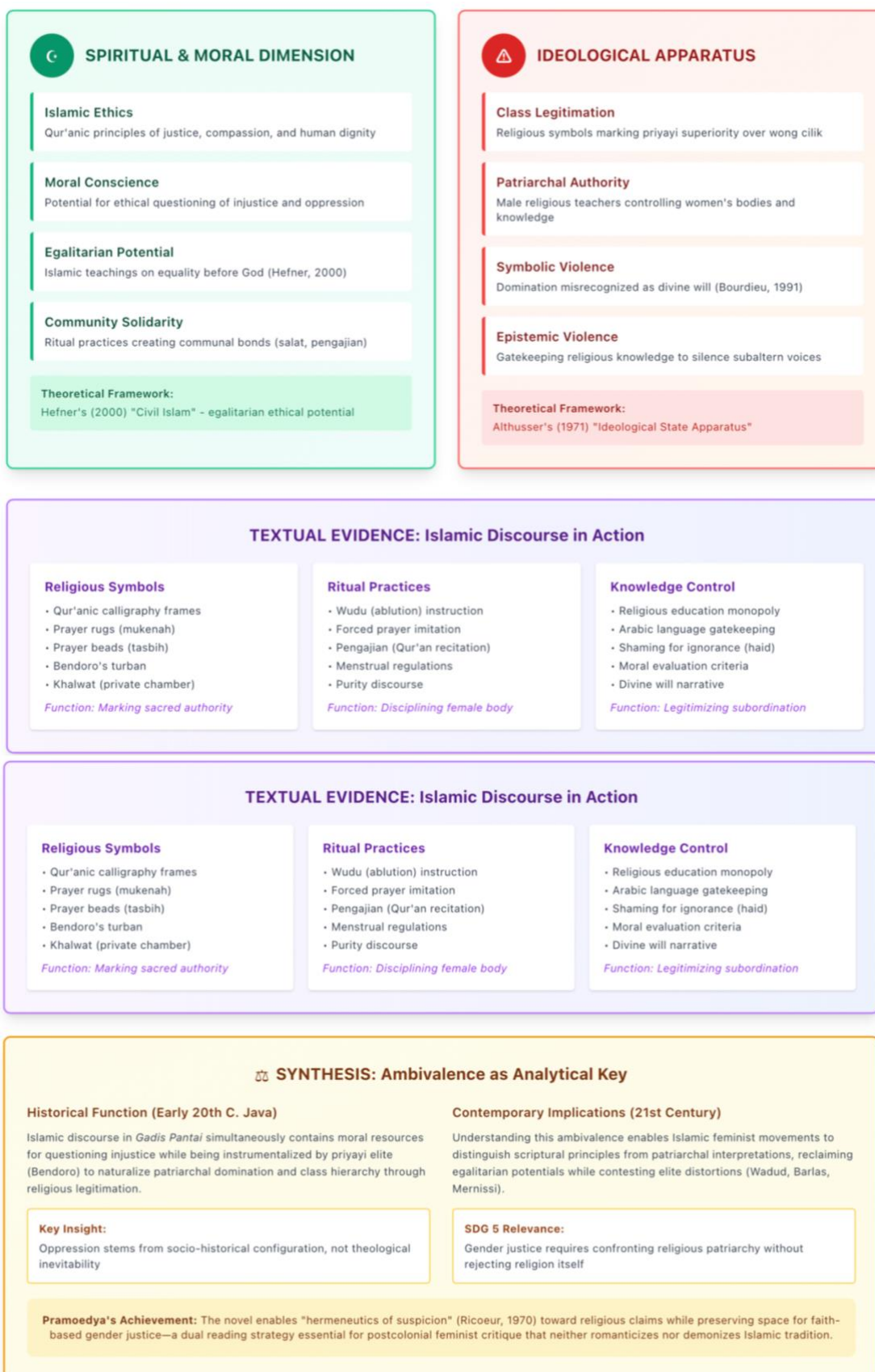


Figure 2. Ambivalent Function of Islamic Discourse in *Gadis Pantai*

Figure 2 synthesizes the dual operational mechanisms of Islamic discourse in *Gadis Pantai*. The left panel demonstrates the spiritual and moral dimensions, Qur'anic principles of justice, egalitarian potential, and community solidarity documented by scholars like Hefner (2000). The right panel reveals how these same religious elements function as ideological apparatus (Althusser, 1971), legitimizing class hierarchy and patriarchal authority through symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991). The center panel provides textual evidence from the novel: religious symbols (calligraphy, prayer rugs), ritual practices (wudu instruction, pengajian), and knowledge control mechanisms (Arabic gatekeeping, purity discourse). The synthesis panel demonstrates why this ambivalence matters: it enables contemporary Islamic feminists to distinguish theological principles from patriarchal instrumentalization, reclaiming religion's egalitarian potentials while contesting elite distortions. This analytical framework directly supports SDG 5 implementation by showing that gender justice in religious contexts requires nuanced engagement rather than wholesale rejection or uncritical acceptance of faith traditions.

Contributions to Postcolonial Feminist Literary Criticism

This analysis advances postcolonial feminist literary criticism by demonstrating how attention to religious discourse enriches understanding of gendered colonial and postcolonial subjectivities. While much postcolonial feminist scholarship focuses on secular nationalism or economic exploitation, this study shows how religious institutions and discourses operate as crucial, yet often underanalyzed, mechanisms through which colonial and indigenous patriarchies reproduced themselves. Analysis of Javanese Islam in *Gadis Pantai* opens interpretive space linking history, religion, and gender interdisciplinarily. This interdisciplinary approach responds to Spivak's (1985) call for postcolonial critics to attend to the specific historical conditions through which subaltern women's voices are produced and foreclosed, rather than assuming universal categories of "woman" or "the colonized."

The study also contributes methodologically by modeling how literary texts can function as archives of social relations often obscured in official historical records. Colonial archives typically document elite male perspectives and state administrative concerns, marginalizing women's experiences and subaltern populations. Literature, particularly realist fiction grounded in autobiographical experience like *Gadis Pantai*, provides alternative historical evidence, what Trouillot (1995) calls "silences in the archive" made partially audible through aesthetic representation. Pramoedya's narrative recovers his grandmother's story, transforming private family memory into public critique and historical documentation. This archival function of literature proves especially valuable for feminist historiography seeking to reconstruct women's lives from fragmentary sources.

Finally, the analysis demonstrates the continuing relevance of historical literary study for contemporary gender justice movements. Understanding how patriarchal systems operated historically, their strategies of legitimation, their vulnerabilities, their contradictions, equips current activists with analytical tools for dismantling present oppressions. This research contributes to understanding how religious discourse intersects with power relations and gender oppression in Indonesian postcolonial literature, offering critical insights for contemporary gender justice movements and Islamic feminism discourse in Southeast Asian contexts. The novel shows that gender inequality is neither natural nor religiously inevitable but rather historically constructed and thus historically changeable. This insight energizes activism by revealing that what patriarchy claims as eternal and divinely ordained is actually contingent and contestable, a realization that literary analysis uniquely facilitates through its attention to narrative, language, and the gaps between ideological claims and lived realities.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Gadis Pantai* (1987) functions as a critical literary archive documenting how Islamic discourse operated as an ideological apparatus legitimizing patriarchal domination and class stratification in early twentieth-century Javanese coastal society. The novel's unique contribution lies in its exposure of religion's dual functionality: while containing moral and spiritual resources for human dignity, Islamic practices and symbols were systematically instrumentalized by the *priyayi* elite, embodied in Bendoro as both nobleman and religious teacher, to naturalize gender subordination and social hierarchy. Through meticulous representation of religious rituals, spatial arrangements, and symbolic violence, Pramoedya demonstrates that the oppression of subaltern women like *Gadis Pantai* emerged not from theological necessity but from specific historical articulations of

feudalism, colonial modernity, and patriarchal Islam. This finding challenges essentialist narratives that attribute gender inequality in Muslim societies to inherent religious dictates, instead revealing how patriarchal interpretations served elite class interests in colonial contexts. The novel's ambivalent treatment of Javanese Islam, simultaneously critiquing its co-optation for domination while acknowledging its ethical dimensions, provides crucial historical grounding for contemporary Islamic feminist movements in Southeast Asia seeking to disentangle patriarchy from religious tradition. By demonstrating that oppressive religious practices reflect contingent socio-historical configurations rather than immutable truths, this research offers intellectual resources for activists challenging gender inequality within Muslim-majority postcolonial societies globally.

The scholarly significance of this study extends beyond Indonesian literary criticism to broader fields of postcolonial feminist theory, Islamic gender studies, and comparative literature, with direct implications for advancing Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality) in contexts where religious discourse shapes social policy and gender norms. By modeling interdisciplinary methodology integrating Spivak's subaltern theory with historical contextualization of Javanese Islam, this research demonstrates how literary analysis can recover marginalized voices systematically excluded from official archives, thereby enriching feminist historiography and postcolonial studies. The findings have practical relevance for contemporary gender justice practitioners, Islamic feminists, and policymakers navigating tensions between cultural authenticity and women's rights: understanding historical mechanisms through which patriarchy claimed religious legitimacy enables more effective strategies for contesting such claims today. However, this study acknowledges significant limitations: as textual analysis of a single novel by a male author, it cannot fully represent lived experiences of historical Javanese women, and the research methodology excludes oral histories, archival documents, and ethnographic data that might complicate or contradict literary representations. Future research should pursue comparative analyses examining gender-religion intersections across Indonesian literary works by women authors, conduct ethnographic studies with contemporary Islamic feminist activists to trace connections between historical patterns and present struggles, investigate similar dynamics in other Southeast Asian Muslim societies (Malaysia, Southern Thailand, Mindanao) to assess *Gadis Pantai's* regional representativeness, and employ digital humanities methodologies for corpus analysis of religious discourse in Indonesian postcolonial literature. Such multidirectional inquiry will deepen understanding of how religious traditions can be both sites of oppression and resources for liberation, a tension central to achieving gender justice in the 21st century's diverse religious landscapes.

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