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# Discursive Construction of Subject and Ideological Fantasy in Postcolonial Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the discursive contestation through which ‘the subject’—in this case, post-colonial Indonesia—is constructed as a means of understanding the role of ideological fantasy in subject construction. Data were selected purposively from several novels and analyzed using a discourse approach. This paper finds that, within the analyzed texts, colonial (modern) discourses intersect and are contested with local religion and values. An overlap may thus be identified in the ideological fantasy of Indonesia’s postcolonial subjects.

**Keywords:** *subject; discursive; ideological fantasy; postcolonial; modernism*

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## INTRODUCTION

As a nation, Indonesia is a collection of subjects that have empirically and historically encountered layers of discursive construction. Indonesians have been shaped by their experiences living with specific cultural, religious, gender, and ethnic identities, as well as their historical experiences with colonialism, modernization and/or postmodernization. Collectively, these varied empirical and rational experiences are generally referred to as social constructs, and contribute to the discursive construction process.

This article seeks to understand how Indonesia builds its self-awareness and “identity” through discursive constructions (Foucault 1973, 1976; Hall, 1992). Its subject differs from the subject of grammar, the subject of law, the subject of philosophy, and the subject of self (cf. Mansfield, 2000). It argues that subjects shape themselves in different categories, and thus individuals have multiple identities. Any individual or subject can simultaneously be identified as Javanese, Muslim, Javanese Muslim, etc. (cf. Rose, 1996). Its subject may be termed the modern and/or postcolonial subject.

Discursive construction inherently contains power, and this power frames self-awareness and identity in

the face of intercultural relationships and discourses. For example, to retain a Javanese identity, persons will Javanese values, ethics, and norms. Similarly, a Malay will adhere to Malay values while simultaneously being Muslim and recognizing the Indonesian nation as one that was once colonized. Individual identities change and overlap in daily practice, depending on their specific circumstances, conditions, and needs. Similarly, the ideological formations contained by subjects vary, depending on the empirical historicity they experience.

This paper discusses the discursive construction of ‘the subject’, in which ideological power plays an inherent role. In doing so, it investigates ideological fantasy by examining literary works as well as the processes through which they are written. This paper, therefore, will discuss the social constructs that embody postcolonial and modern subjects.

For its understanding of ideological fantasy, this paper refers to Žižek’s (1989/2009). Ideological fantasy is one way to manipulate subjects’ knowledge about the Real. When the subject is socially constructed, said subject is bound by the symbolic order. Although the symbolic order causes the subject to bear the Other, the

subject knows that it cannot be achieved because the furthest or deepest exploration of the Other leads only to emptiness. In this context, democracy, social justice, and prosperity are ‘something else’, being increasingly sought and championed yet ultimately discovered as symbolic.

In symbolic space, there is an interesting attraction between the Real and the Other, with ideological fantasies working to connect and simultaneously manipulate them. Ideological fantasy, in this sense, serves as a tool or strategy for covering, wrapping, or manipulating the subject to ensure that the ‘Real’ remains unknown. Even when the subject knows, he pretends that he does not. As stated by Žižek, the problem of ideology today is that we know we are doing a certain action, but we seem not to know, and continues to perform the action anyways. Žižek identifies this as a cynical consciousness (Žižek, 1989).

This article outlines the complex discursive construction of the subject in Indonesian literary works, including the influence of culture and religion, to reveal the ideological fantasy behind it. This cannot be separated from Indonesia’s position as a former colony, and as such the discourse examined is a postcolonial one. This article is divided into three sections. The first discusses “the construction of a discursive subject”, finding that construction of the symbolic order of the subject in Indonesian literature has been heavily shaped by colonialism. The second section explores the “ideological fantasy of postcolonial subjects”, revealing the fantasy subject and the dualism of nationalism and locality. Finally, the third section discusses “ideological fantasy in modern subjects”, exploring the ideological fantasy of modern subjects in literary works as political action.

## **DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF SUBJECT**

In their cultural history, Indonesians experienced colonization and colonial capitalism (as early phenomena of capitalism and modernism) simultaneously (cf. Alatas, 1977). Although in some cases colonization and colonial capitalism are similar, these phenomena also have distinguishable traits. Both colonization and colonial capitalism involve contact between Indonesian subjects and foreign (cultural) subjects, which necessarily include differences, conflicts, and processes of adjustment or negotiation. Owing to the strong political and economic position of these foreign subjects, many Indonesian subjects adopted elements of their culture (either voluntarily or under duress). Under these foreign influences, Indonesia began experiencing a process of modernization.

The difference between colonization and colonial capitalism lies in the ideological boundaries that are part of their respective symbolic orders. Colonization ideologizes West and East by framing the West (colonizer) as superior and the East (colonized, in this case Indonesia) as inferior and subordinate (Said, 1978). Meanwhile, modernization, as supported by the ideology of colonial capitalism, is more a process of social change towards a more advanced and modern order (see also Alatas, 1977). Concepts of modernity are directly linked to the capitalist order or system.

Symbolic order, as a discursive construct, was created by the colonial government by attributing different statuses and social classes to persons of different ethnic backgrounds, with Europeans at the top, followed by Eurasians (Indos), East Asians, and the indigenous people (Lohanda, 2001). This had implications for development of the subject’s relationships and self-awareness. When such a consciousness becomes ideological, colonized subjects generally do two things. First, they may symbolically attempt to become Westerners, thereby gaining “superiority” and new status in society. Second, indigenous subjects may resist in many ways, including both symbolic and physical.

It should be remembered that, long before colonization and modernization entered Indonesia, Indonesians had their own local beliefs, which ranged from animism and dynamism through Buddhism and Hinduism. Such local spaces and discourses were “mysterious”, relatively untouched by the colonial. However, the symbolic order was influenced by Islamic, Protestant, and Catholic orders (see Lombard, 1996 and 1996a for further discussion). Over time, Islam positioned itself as dominant for most Indonesians; this is necessary, therefore, to understand its influence on the ideological fantasies that developed in the country. Various negotiations emerged at the ego level, with the above-mentioned ideological fantasy gaps held hostage by the symbolic order.

Over time, the colonized Indonesian nation also experienced processes of modernization. Primarily driven by colonial forces, this modernization involved a series of discursive constructions in a massive social, political, and economic engineering program, one that cultivated the values, ethics, and norms of modernism. Of the various aspects of modernism, this paper emphasizes only a few, namely secularization, rationalization, individualization, technologization, and democratization (cf. Bauman, 1991 and Harvey, 1998).

The implications of modernism can be seen in everyday life practices, including the way modern

subjects realize the content of modernity. They are evident in the rational and individual ways people contextualize success and their identities, associating them with particular lifestyles, and assuming that success is due to the modern subject's efforts to realize self-awareness (as a result of secularism).

Also worth mentioning is that modernization, modernity, and modernism have historically had a mutually supportive relationship with capitalism. Initially, the capitalism that emerged in the West—in the modern countries of Europe and America—drove the rise of modernism. These concepts subsequently spread to Asia, including Indonesia, through intensive contact and intervention. Since the 19th century, and throughout the 20th century, Indonesia gradually became more modern and entered the global capitalist network.

After Indonesia's independence, and especially since the New Order period, economic development was promoted through capitalism. Numerous studies have explored this process in Indonesia, during which discourses of development and economic growth were cornerstones of the New Order regime. In this manner, the Indonesian state emphasized the development of successful modern subjects, development subjects, and economic subjects that followed the rules of modernity (the so-called identity).

This drove the creation of the so-called modern lifestyle (see also Chaney, 1996), defined as living in accordance with rules of modernity as a means of distinguishing and classifying oneself (Bourdieu 1994). It emulates the lifestyles of advanced societies, like those in New York, Paris, London, etc. It is under the auspices of the capitalist order, being a place where the symbols of capitalism, branded brands, and technological devices are regarded as measures of success in modern life. Even in religious life, various commodities are available for religious practice to appear modern. This has implications for the ideological fantasies of modern subjects.

## **IDEOLOGICAL FANTASY OF POSTCOLONIAL SUBJECTS**

The symbolic order of colonialism, as discussed extensively by Said (1978) and Fanon (1967), creates patterns of consciousness and identity that vary according to their cultural location (Bhabha, 1984). At the same time, however, it utilizes specific ideological fantasies as a strategic way to manipulate the condition of The Real. It is these ideological fantasies that enable colonized peoples to survive and endure despite their powerlessness. This is not to say that colonized people do not know that the

social construction of the colonial symbolic order is not something Real. Rather, they pretend not to know, thus having a reason to continuously carry out resistance and develop the imaginary.

This is evident in several Indonesian novels, including colonial novels such as *Sitti Nurbaya* (Rusli, 1999/1922) and *Salah Asuhan* (Muis, 2000/1928) and post-colonial novels such as *Para Priyayi* (Kayam, 1992), *Jalan Menikung* (Kayam, 2002), and *Bumi Manusia* (Toer, 1980). For instance, in *Salah Asuhan*, when Hanafi sees an ash tray filled with cigarette butts in Corrie's residence, he knows who Corrie is. However, he deliberately ignores or forgets this symbolic interpretation (fantasy ideology) so he can still like Corrie. Meanwhile, *Jalan Menikung* provides an example of how racist and discriminatory prejudices against different nationalities and religions become fantasies that surround the knowledge of the real thing. In this novel, Umar Kayam deliberately did not show how the "naked" should be told. Many Indonesian novels depict discriminatory prejudices against persons with racial, religious, and ethnic differences. These novels use color, sex, romance, profession, and other categories to distinguish between the West/the colonizer and the East/the colonized.

It is interesting, then, that the West/the colonizer also developed its own symbolic frame to maintain the balance of the colonial order (see Said, 1978). Their works, on the one hand, described colonized peoples as rough, wild, dirty, and stupid, but at the same time developed their ideological fantasy that framed the colonized as polite, friendly, virtuous, and noble. Indeed, this contradiction cannot be deemed binary; rather, it provides a dynamic opportunity for both parties to contest the symbolic order.

In the ambiguous space of symbolic order, the colonized (Indonesia) people were trapped between being constructed as polite and virtuous or being constructed as wild, rude, ignorant, and uncivilized. Ultimately, the line between these frames became blurred. This affected their ideological fantasy, creating a deep-rooted sense of unworthiness and awkwardness. This drove many actions, and even imaginary plots, that provided no answers or solute patterns for ongoing problems. Strategic safety, commonly promoted in the name of harmony, further impacted these fantasies.

The blurring of the boundaries between politeness and wildness posed exciting creative challenges to the ideological fantasy. Where creativity was possible, ideological fantasy played an important role in hybridization. The "Eurasian face" (*Wajah Indo*) that dominated Indonesian soap operas (as symbolic systems)

in the 1980s and 1990s offers one example. The “faces” in these shows were not quite Europeans; they were not white, had differently shaped eyes, etc. At the same time, however, these “faces” conveyed a physical fantasy, a subconscious dream that rejects the indigenous body and face. Such phenomena can be extended to the issue of sexuality; postcolonial subjects may fantasize the conquest of Western women as an imaginary conquest of the colonial.

On the other hand, ideological fantasy can also be seen as a means of retaliation, as seen in the histories of formerly colonized nations. This can be seen by their emphases on stories of successful battle against invaders (both physical and non-physical). Battles cannot be wild; they must be won respectfully, whilst maintaining integrity and etiquette. Heroes, meanwhile, are those identified as maintaining virtue and nobility even when fighting a war. Conversely, historical fantasies emphasize not the power of the colonial forces, but their cunning and greed. This can be seen implicitly in films such as *Cut Nyak Dien* and *Naga Bonar I and II*.

These may still be considered ideological fantasies, and as such they serve to bridge what is real and what is expected. As *real* (with *r* substantively representing *R*), Indonesia remains a once-colonized nation, one that experienced almost complete economic and political conquest, as well as a post-colonial nation that has learned much from its invaders.

Meanwhile, at the expectation level of the *other* (with *o* substantively representing *O*), these ideological fantasies enable Indonesians to win their battle and exhibit virtues that will be maintained throughout all future struggles. These fantasies position military victory and heroism as early representations of the quest for justice, happiness, and prosperity (an *Other*) in a sovereign state. Such points are prominent in many literary works, especially those set in colonial times. Several novels specifically narrate the heroism of historical leaders such as Diponogoro, Ahmad Dahlan, Kartini, and so forth. Such ideological fantasies are also broadly cultivated at the local level, with regional governments investigating and publishing stories of local struggles and heroism.

Fanon (1967) alludes that the fantasy state, with its face of false ambivalence, is considered a disease of postcolonial society. However, Fanon also writes that this stigma stems from the intervention and policies of the invaders. If it were not for historical futility, there would be no reason to allow one nation to oppress another. According to Fanon, this is exacerbated by the fact that the colonial nation implemented its policies based on its consideration of its own economic and political

advantages, as well as colonial discourses that constrained the imagination of the colonized peoples. Even today, the colonized nation (Indonesia) has yet to shed these discourses.

Over the course of Indonesian history, awareness of colonial traces, values, and symbols has become increasingly challenged. This is related to two things. First, Indonesian culture’s politics and strategy have continuously underscored the nation (nationalism) and Pancasila (Pancasilaism), which are not only derived from the ideas that developed through the First Cultural Polemic but have gained legitimacy through postcolonial studies. Second, awareness of cultural policies has affected the search for local or regional identity. Ultimately, as will be explained later, colonial subjects’ ideological fantasies overlap with those of modern subjects.

## IDEOLOGICAL FANTASY IN MODERN SUBJECTS

It has been discussed how the social construction of modernity serves to create modern subjects. Indonesia is not only experiencing postcolonialism, but also modernism, and as such its residents exist within the symbolic orders of modernism and capitalism. In some contexts, Indonesians have even entered the postmodern era. However, this paper focuses only on capitalism/modernism.

In the symbolic order of modernism, all of our activities and actions inevitably exist within the frame of modernism. According to Žižek, even supposing that writers have a certain independence (imagined as human authenticity) when writing their literary works, they cannot escape the symbolic order around them. In socializing their works, writers are bound by the rules of the circulation market. Meanwhile, when trying to negotiate ideology in their works, writers can simply produce discourse; they may even use ideology as nothing more than a commodity.

In this context, Žižek argues that writers often criticize the injustices of capitalism without having to experience said injustices. These writers enjoy life in the symbolic order, benefiting from the capitalization of their symbolic, social, and cultural capital. By managing these types of capital—i.e., by successfully converting them—, it is possible for writers to also enjoy increased economic capital.

Indonesian literary works have continued to emerge in such a situation. Popular literary works such as *chicklit* generally present modern female characters, some living as single adults, who are highly educated,

gainfully employed, independent, well informed, and of course have modern commodities. The fantasy dimension is that such a lifestyle, especially in Indonesian society, is often hindered by obstacles derived from cultural and religious values. Nonetheless, they dream of gaining freedom, as well as a happiness (the *Other*) that likely could not be obtained. The characters know that their lifestyles and practices are not fully accepted, but try to camouflage this knowledge and present themselves as living their dreams. Such characters are trapped in a parallax space, an unstable meeting room that remains eternally torn between *the Real* and *the Other*.

In such popular novels, male characters experience similar phenomena, with their experiences underpinning what is known as metrosexuality. In these novels, metrosexual men are depicted as successful, dressed in expensive clothes and accessories, using branded goods, and confidently enjoying their lives. However, these metrosexual men are also trapped in a parallax space, and their fantasy position thus fits only in the symbolic order of capitalism. They pretend not to know that they have never succeeded in achieving *the Other*, even as their ideological fantasies shape their awareness of *the Real*.

In the context of popular literature, there is nothing special about the emergence of successful single female characters or metrosexual male characters. Popular literature positions itself plainly as part of capital circulation, which prioritizes the profit potential of a work over its aesthetic considerations. Specific themes, characterizations, backgrounds, and motives become popular, shape market tastes, and remain regularly reproduced as long as they are commercially viable. It must be emphasized that popular literature, as well as its authors, are not pressured to criticize or expose the symbolic order of capitalism itself. Within the literary arena, it is thus distinguished from aesthetic literature, which has its own rules of play.

Reflecting a similar trend, even as its themes are different, is Islamic or da'wah literature. In this genre of popular literature, the stories and characters inexorably prioritize the grace and approval of God. These stories convey the message that human beings are not self-deterministic; there is a higher power, a more powerful will. Such literature has a broad readership and distribution, both urban and rural. As such, this genre of popular literature is paradoxically part of capitalism. Despite its orientation towards da'wah, towards the negotiation of Islamic ideology, this genre of popular fiction is part of the capitalist system it rejects. Capitalism reifies anything that could be capitalized, up to and including da'wah.

Andrea Hirata's novel *Laskar Pelangi* (2005) may be taken as another example. In this novel, a group of children see the everyday activities and success of a cement factory, and thus desire to achieve similar success. As they deal with matters of emotion, romance, and religion, these children prove that they can become successful adults. This novel, with its compelling storytelling technique, sold well on the market. It received numerous reprint, and was widely discussed by academics and critics. As such, the novel's publisher and author had a huge commercial advantage.

Less focus, however, was given to the ideology of the novel itself. It not only shows how capitalism operates, but even implicitly ideologizes capitalism. It can be seen that the children are framed as depending fully on local employers and owners. They aspire to succeed, dreaming what Marx terms the bourgeois dream, and through diligence and hard work they are able to realize this dream. Such a fantasy was in fact compatible with Indonesia's modern subjects, and thus enabled the novel to become immensely popular. Although the novel presented itself as religious, it did not provide anything to counter the symbolic order of capitalism.

What, then, is the situation with "serious literature"? Before discussing this matter, I would like to first ask how literature works. Although "serious literature" may be forced upon others, it cannot be deemed popular literature, lacking the marketing and reader expectations that characterize the genre. As an example, I would like to take Joko Santoso's novel *Penangsang Mersah Rembulan* (2016). This novel was not intended as a commodity, as a means of obtaining a profit. Instead, it presents resistance to the ruling regime, as seen in the character Penangsang and his ability to resurrect others. He ends up being incapable of handling power, and thus the novel does not quite satisfy the reader's expectations.

This novel's ideological fantasy tries to mediate the failure of Penangsang by emphasizing that his powers cannot honestly be defeated by anyone. It can only be defeated by trickery, as opposed to honesty. The important message is that, even with this deceit, the real fight is still won by Penangsang. Penangsang is a hero in *The Other* order. I suspect that the author knows that contemporary life takes place in the symbolic order of modernity, wherein honesty is subordinated. However, this knowledge is deliberately hidden. The story of Penangsang is an ideological fantasy, one that not only presents the failure to achieve the *Other* but also the failure of the *Real*.

The novel *Mantra Pejina Ular* (2000) provides another example of "serious literature". Written by

Kuntowijoyo, a renowned historian and poet who may certainly be identified as a modern man with a good Western education, presents a specific ideological fantasy. Through his character Abu Kasan Sapari, Kuntowijoyo tells the story of an earthy young man who studied puppetry from his parents before learning the art of snake-charming. However, his life trajectory further changed after Sapari was asked to manage a local political campaign. Despite being successful, and without being a party member, Sapari recognizes that party politics inexorably involves fraudulence, trickery, and deceit for political gain. This contrasts significantly with his traditional Javanese values and practices, and Sapari is stunned and shocked by the reality of modern politics. Sapari ultimately decides to escape modern politics and return to rural life as a puppeteer. This narrative highlights another world (*the Other*), a peaceful one that is devoid of economic and political turbulence. This provides fantasy with a victory in defeat.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, it may be seen that Indonesians live in dual symbolic orders of postcolonialism and modern capitalism. These symbolic orders overlap, sharing some similarities while maintaining several differences. Because of the traces of colonial ideology and fantasy that underpin the symbolic order of modernity or capitalism, the ideological fantasies of Indonesia's postcolonial and modern subjects exhibit a certain ambiguity. This is exacerbated by the fact that capitalism embraces a colonial ideology, creating a relatively double-faced ideological fantasy.

Within the dominant symbolic orders of postcolonialism and modern capitalism, various other symbolic orders (such as Islam and locality) attempt to achieve dominance. However, as ideological fantasies they have been unable to succeed, as both of these orders remain dominated by capitalist discourses. This shows that capitalism has continuously operated and modified itself, thereby enabling it to manifest with a religious or local face.

In summary, three kinds of ideological fantasy may be found in postcolonial Indonesian literature. First, there is the ambitious fantasy of conquering invaders or developed nations through imaginative means; such conquest can be physical, psychological, or sexual. Second, fantasy may also involve becoming Westernized or modern; even though Indonesians recognize that they can never become exactly the same as Westerners, such a fantasy still exists. Third, there is the fantasy that conceals

itself within the between the Western and the modern.

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