

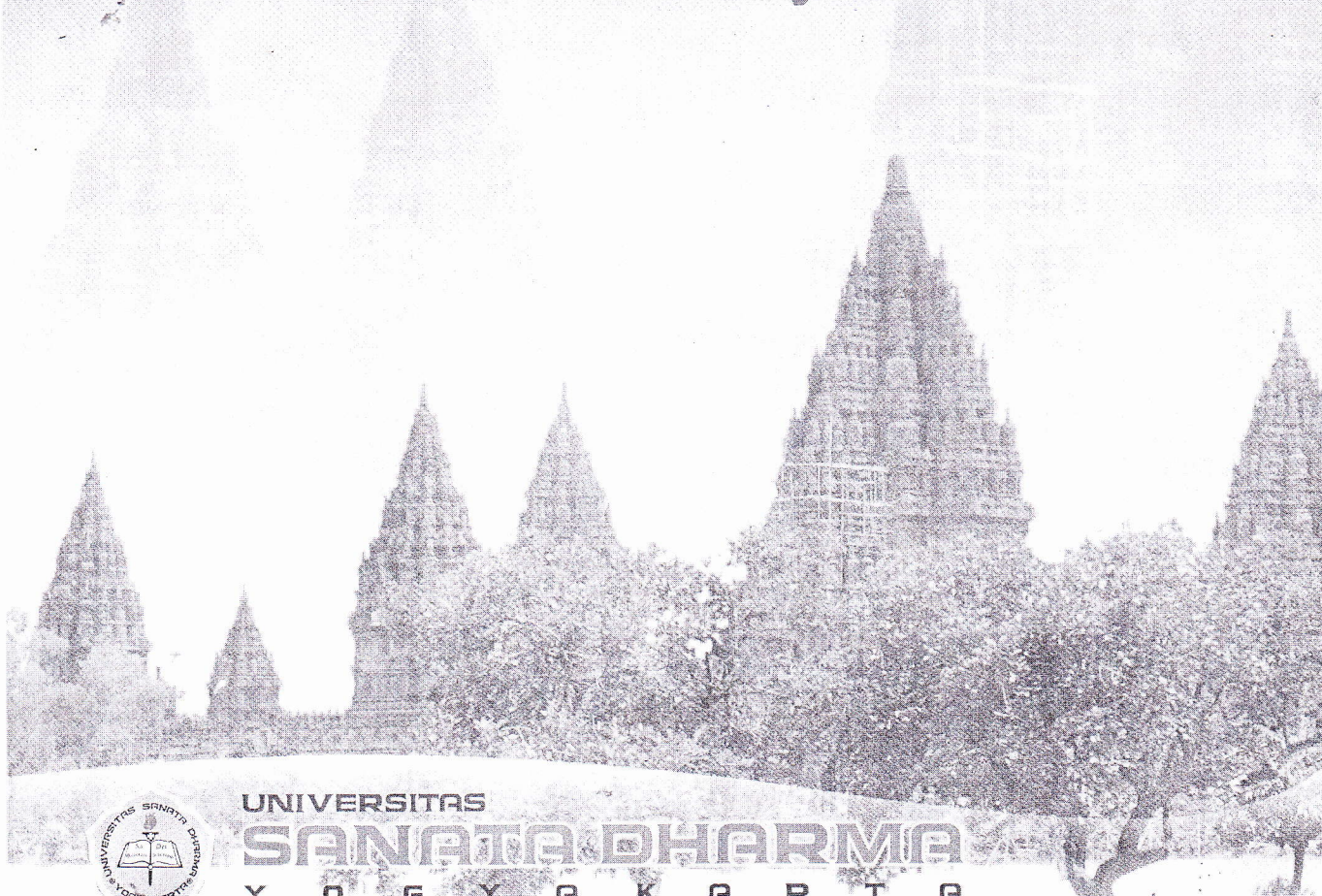
Proceedings

Departments of English Sanata Dharma University,
Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*The 2nd RAFIL International Conference
(Reading Asia, Forging Identities in Literature)*

East - West Encounters

18 - 19 February 2009



UNIVERSITAS

SANATA DHARMA

Y O G Y A K A R T A

**PROCEEDING
EAST – WEST ENCOUNTERS**

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**Penerbitan Fakultas Sastra Program Studi Sastra Inggris
Universitas Sanata Dharma**

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ISBN 978 – 979 – 1088 – 35 – 0

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**MODERNISM VS. NATURALISM
(WESTERN VALUES VS. EASTERN VALUES)
IN PRAMOEDYA'S *THE GIRL FROM THE COAST***

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Abstract

In most of his works, Pramoedya often uses ideas coming from western countries, which are different from the mainstream of Indonesian people worldview. He often criticizes Indonesian values (local culture) that are mostly not in line with universal values – at least based on his concern. He has strong interest in raising human dignity, a matter that is most of the time contradictory with the setting of local culture in his works. He deeply understands that authors have power in creating good sense in society through their works. This phenomenon makes his works are not nationally accepted but internationally welcomed. Many western people have used his works to learn cross-cultural matters about Indonesia.

*One of his works, *The Girl from the Coast*, gives different pattern from most of his works. This personal source novel loads messages towards modernism values brought by western people (Dutch) to Indonesia. These values influence the lifestyle of Indonesian people, particularly the nobility. Pramoedya creates contradiction between modernism practiced by urban people (influenced by Dutch) and naturalism practiced by villagers in north coast Java in 1900s. Through his characters, especially the girl, Pramoedya depicts the way Indonesian people negotiate the displacements of modernity towards naturalism. The Girl's curiosity and empathy lead her to observe her surroundings in ethnographic manner. In the dialogues with mBok – female servant, her father, and with herself, she questions and describes the worlds of both nobility and commoners, each represents modernity and naturalism. Through her poignant perspective regarding to her village, the readers can hear the sounds of village life (e.g. social interaction, ritual performance, etc.) and grasp its significance. Pedagogically, this fictional work thus provides not only socio-cultural information but also more importantly, a sense of people engaged in (re)interpreting their own experience.*

Keywords: modernism, naturalism, nobility, commoner

Introduction

This paper is a small part of the writer's whole research about hegemony and ideologies depicted in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *The Girl from the Coast* (read simply as "Pramoedya" to make it different from his father's and his brother's last name). Naturalism and modernism in the research are some ideologies that exist in the novel representing the ideology of the subaltern and dominant class. In doing the research, the writer applies Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Based on the sub-theme

of Eastern values and experiences in Western language literary works, it is necessary then to take only some findings from the research related to the sub-theme dealing with the Indonesian experiences and values in the colonialism era as illustrated in the novel. The existence of many translation editions of the novel in different languages, it is appropriate to state that the novel is aimed at global readers whose values and experiences might be different from the Indonesian's. In addition, as the novelist represented a number of values and experiences of both Indonesia and Dutch, each stands for Eastern and Western, this paper then seek to disclose those substances.

Talking about the author and the novel, *Library Journal* once gives comment toward Pramoedya's *The Girl from the Coast* (*Gadis Pantai*). Through simple characters and fast-paced narrative style, he deftly explores the complex issues arising when the impoverished interact with the privileged and when women become property. The novel's strong sociopolitical commentary explains why the Indonesian government has banned many of Pramoedya's books and incarcerated him for nearly 15 years. (<http://www.globalexchange.org/update/publications/indonesiaHR.html.pf>). His brave criticism in voicing and expressing the development of the era makes his works were banned by the Indonesian New Order government for a long time. Moreover, many of those works load messages about the struggle of human beings to rise up their dignity as the foundation to build a country. Yet, these credible masterpieces gained positive welcome from the international world (Manuaba, 2003: 276-277). In other word, the prohibition of his works in his own country makes those works were accepted by the international readers.

Through his characters, especially the Girl, Pramoedya depicts the way Indonesian people negotiate the displacements of modernity towards naturalism. He portrayed some differences between the life of the people in the city that influenced by the Western values and the life of the people in the fishing village that still rely much on the sea (nature) as their source of life. The main character, the Girl, who meets these two different ways of life, tries to accommodate those worldviews in her own perspective.

The Girl from the Coast was supposed to be the first volume in a trilogy, loosely based on his family's history, especially their work against first the Dutch, and later the Indonesian military. The nameless title character of this novel comes from a remote fishing village on the north coast of Java that is itself never named. Indeed her father, mother, husband and beloved servant are never named either.

Known only as The Girl from the Coast, Pramoedya's grandmother lived in a small Javanese fishing village around the turn of the 19th century. Her exceptional beauty caught the attention of the *Bendoro*, a noble from the nearby city of Rembang. Since she would otherwise face a life of extreme hardship and poverty, the girl's parents agree to marry her off, sight unseen, to the *Bendoro*. She is quickly transported off to a world literally and figuratively miles away from her village. Pramoedya masterfully invokes the sense of bewilderment the girl feels when she first encounters things like mattresses, electric lights, and chocolate sprinkles for cereal. Pramoedya shows how the dual hierarchy of Indonesian nobility and Dutch imperialists create a world that regards women as

little more than property, a world where gold and pretense went hand in hand. (Bloomstran, <http://www.mostlyfiction.com/world/toer.htm>)

In the novel, his grandmother brings the ideas of oppression towards the inferior class and feudalism carried out by the superior class. The phenomenon was not only fictional but he also witnessed it when his grandmother could only address her own daughter and son in law with *ndoro*, a title for privileged people (Toer, 1997: 19-20). He expresses his feeling towards his grandmother through the nameless character of the Girl from the coast since until her death, Pramoedya had never known the name of the woman.

Who is, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, anyway? He earned several accolades, and was frequently discussed as Indonesia's and Southeast Asia's best candidate for a Nobel Prize in Literature. Pramoedya was born on February 6, 1925, in the town of Blora in the heartland of Java, then a part of the Dutch East Indies. He was the firstborn son in his family; his father was a teacher, who was also active in Boedi Oetomo, and his mother was a rice trader. His name was actually Pramoedya Ananta Mastoer; however, he felt that the family name Mastoer (his father's name) seemed too aristocratic. The Javanese prefix "Mas" refers to a man of the lowest rank in a noble family. Consequently, he omitted "Mas" and kept Toer as his family name.

Pramoedya's breathtaking literary skill is evident in every word of this book, this classic work of fiction made especially poignant because it is based on the life of his own grandmother. As this work is a serious fiction loading his grandmother's experiences, the readers can listen to the creator through his creation related to his personal life. Related to this, Jason and Lefcovitz (qtd. in Herujiyanto, 2007: 13-14) say that prose fiction contains the history of one or more characters, or something that acts like a character. The very character(s) can also be representative(s) of the writer him/herself; that the work is made of the author's special flight of imagination, of cultural aspects and pedagogy, which is grounded in her or his accumulated experiences – thus, the work has a significant relation to the world of actuality.

Set on the colonial period and in the north coast of Java Island, it is easy to reveal that the Eastern and Western values dissolved to each other in the Dutch East Indies in its the colonial period through *The Girl from the Coast*. Since the novel is a historical novel, the old -fashioned biographical approach can still be a useful tool to look into the work and to get a better understanding. As the novel has been widely translated into many western languages, the international readers learn about Indonesia from this source. Therefore, it is particularly remarkable to expose the encounters of the western and eastern values and experiences represented in the novel through the notions of modernity brought by the Dutch (West) into Indonesia (East) together with other values related to modernity, and the traditional Indonesian cultural values depicted in the novel.

Naturalism vs. Modernism

Sandra Rosenthal in Barnes and Noble New American Encyclopedia defines naturalism as "a philosophical position that holds that all that exists is natural. Everything that can be experienced is within the spatio-temporal order of nature. Moral values, however, may emerge in the relation between human beings as one part of

nature and the rest of nature. As part of nature, humans are subject to lawful natural processes; intelligence emerges from the active life of organisms within nature." (1991: 50)

The Girl from the Coast provides the readers with two different setting of places, namely, the city inhabited by the Javanese aristocrats and the Dutch, and the fishing village settled by the commoners. Antlov and Cederroth asserted that in the colonial period, only a few information can we obtain from the condition in the village since the center of the government was in the city. The Dutch will concern with the village only if there is a rebellion. The piece of information that we can know for sure is that *dorpsrepubliek* (republic in the village) is a non-active community that manages itself with a *volkschoofd* (leader of the villagers) who has natural paternalistic authority (2001: 3). As a result, having different settlement makes both classes have different principles in seeing the life.

All characters who live in the fishing village believe that nature is all there is and all basic truths are truths of nature. In their worldview, nature is the state that gives them life. Therefore, they glorify the sea as gratefulness as it has given them many sources of life. The Girl, one of the villagers, who has married with a privileged Javanese aristocrat – *Bendoro* – still keeps the belief. Even though, in the city, she experienced many new concepts of life and society different from what she has got in her village, one of them is Islamic ideology to counter the ideology that nature is everything; even though this value was not from the Dutch. The practice of religion in the history of Indonesia also marked the coming of modernism comparing with the traditional doctrine that still glorifies merely on the nature itself. However, the shaping of the Girl's consciousness cannot reach a consensus. It occurs as she lives in a tradition, which shapes her consciousness that the sea is the only source of life for the fishermen. The villagers do not have much time to think about religion, education, and other concepts. What they think and practice is only how to survive in the life.

Likewise, the Girl learns from her society that they should respect the sea as their ancestors, which has given them a life. They even do not admit Javanese ancestors portrayed through puppetry (*wayang*). It takes place since the idea of naturalism also means a teaching that does not admit other power except the power of nature. Therefore, any belief to other things beside nature, these people will not accept easily including Islamic teaching and worldview spread through puppetry (*wayang*). The naturalists – people who believe in the power of nature – simply assert that nature is reality, the whole of it. There is nothing beyond, nothing "other than", and no "other world" of being. The Girl as the main character obtained the concept from the explanation of an old man as the elders in the village.

"The old man once told me, mBok, that everything comes from the sea. The sea is the most powerful thing there is. We wouldn't have had any ancestors if the sea hadn't been there first." (Toer, 1991: 54)

The Girl learns the ideas performed by her parents and the society in her village. Her daily activities are only mending fishing net and pounding shrimp. In fact, from the quotation we may see that they regard the sea as their ancestors, which is different from the general ancestors of the Javanese people. The belief indicates that

there is ideology of naturalism that glorifies the nature among the villagers in the novel.

The idea of naturalism, thus, sees individual characters such as the people in the fishing village as helpless products of heredity and environment, motivated by strong instinctual drives from within to survive. In doing so, they rely on the sea as the powerful state that always gives them sources of life. On the other hand, their life is harassed by social and economic pressures. As such, they have little will or responsibility for their fates, and the prognosis for their cases was pessimistic at the outset (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1979: 222). It comes about to the villagers since as fishermen, they have no power in economic.

Their life concentrates in the sea. The belief and ritual of the villagers are only from what they perform every day as fishermen that is looking for fish in the sea. Besides, their goal of their life is only how to survive. The sea has provided them materials to survive; thus, they do not need education, property, religion, etc. practiced by the urban people. The principles of the villagers towards the values coming from the city can be seen in the dialogue between the Girl and her father.

"Prayer-beads?"

"The Bendoro sent them to you. They're black. Made of hard wood. From Mecca."

"What will I do with prayer-beads?"

"The Bendoro sends his regards. He's prepared to pay for a chapel, if the people would like to have one."

"How grand."

"Of course no one would. They're all too busy sailing and trying to catch fish."

"Don't be rude."

"It wasn't meant that way. I know how hard you work. No one has enough time to grow corn, let alone build a chapel or study books all day." (Toer, 1991: 118)

In contrast with the villagers' way of life, the people who live in the city have absorbed the values brought by the Dutch. Therefore, the different perspective of the people who live in the city and those live in the village might be also because of the coming of modernism brought by the Dutch. John B. Glubb explained that modernism is in fact visualizing the things that characterize the Western people's worldview. To some degree, this is perfectly justifiable for the West, as a whole is the wealthiest and powerful part of the world and one that other nations are seeking to imitate. In endeavor to become more like the West and that, this process will inevitably involve a conflict (1966: 9).

In feudal Javanese society, we may find the reinterpretation of traditional doctrines through the privileged status in the beginning of the 20th century. Since the Dutch government has proclaimed ethics politics, not only the genetics origin and wealth that determined to be member of privileged class, but education also became the point to have the position as the privileged class. The privileged people in the 20th century were the aristocrats who became important figures in the society. They were enlightened educated people in the fields of religion, art, and philosophy (Geertz, 81: 307). Related to these characteristics, Mardinah makes use of it as a member of the

privileged class to attack The Girl as a commoner. As has been noted previously, the conflicts will occur in the effort to become like the West.

"Mas Nganten," the young woman said softly, "I can read and write. Can you?"

The Girl from the Coast was jolted for the third time in the same day.

"What does your father do, Mas Nganten? He is a fisherman, isn't he? He is, I know it. Do you know what my father was? He was a clerk before he retired."

The Girl was astounded a fourth time. Mardinah laughed victoriously. (Toer, 1991: 82)

By having the ability to read and write, the values introduced by the Dutch, Mardinah uphold her position as the upper class people. She has practiced one of the principles of modernism; thus, she prejudiced the Girl as 'backward' as she has not adopted the Western standards. Glubb supported that nations, which have not adopted Western institutions, they call "backward" and the suggestion that they should abandon their time-honored ways of thought in favor of "modernism" – that is to say, their method. Some of these considerations may prove to the problem of "modernism" in Indonesian history occurs in the novel (1966: 9). On the contrary, since the villagers do not put any matters beside the how-to-survive-problem, they believe that education for any reason is not valuable.

"The Bendoro said he can send us a teacher."

"How will we pay him?"

"The Bendoro will pay him on our behalf."

"Will the fish behave themselves if we learn to chant the Koran?"

"They might. No one has tried it before."

.....
"What will I tell the Bendoro?"

"Tell him the sea provides us with all we need. The sea is rich. It is just that our human effort counts for so little....." (Toer, 1991: 119)

As has been asserted previously, the coming of modernism brought by the Dutch was initiated by the implementation of liberal politics of the Dutch government, and it was even more developed in the era of ethics politics. This idea came from some people in the Dutch parliament who criticized the exploitative system carried out by the Dutch government, which was conservative and profitable only for the Dutch. Van Deventer wrote an article in *De Gids* in 1898 entitled *Hutang Kehormatan* – honor obligation. He explained that the Dutch has moral obligation to Indonesia that has to be paid by giving prosperity to Indonesian people, which is one of the programs was through education (Nurtjahjo, 2000: 25).

Based on those considerations, the Dutch government created a new policy in education since 1901. The policy concerned with the implementation of education for Boemi Poetra teachers, and Dutch was expected to be the main/formal language in the schools (Nurtjahjo, 2000: 29). Nevertheless, in the real field, the process has some limitations. Indisch Bald No. 14/1902 contained a tight requirement of the genetics origin if the people wanted to send their children to the Dutch school. In this case, the

education is only for the Indonesian privileged people. The commoners did not have right to access the schooling.

The existence of the Dutch education can be viewed from *Bendoro's* sons and his younger relatives who stay in his house. As the descendant of the Javanese aristocrats, they have right to get education in the Dutch school.

A quarter an hour later, they heard the Bendoro Guru speaking in the language they couldn't understand and Agus Rahmat answering him in the same unfamiliar language.

"The Bendoro teaches his sons very well," the headman whispered.

"Even the little ones can speak Dutch. And we don't understand a single word. Your child," he said turning toward The Girl from the Coast, "will learn to talk like that." (Toer, 1991: 8)

In contrast, as the commoner, the Girl has never learned the western education as the consequence of the limitation of education only for those who are from privileged status. However, after being the *Bendoro's* wife, she can learn skill and the use of some modern tools provided in the mansion. Besides, she also can learn Dutch language autodidactic even though she only knows the meaning.

The Girl from the Coast slowly grew used to a life in which there were many facilities to make her work easier. She grew used to the sound of the young men speaking Dutch as they left the chapel to the left or main house. The voices pierced the walls of her room and told her many things she had never known before.

"If you went back to your village, Mas Nganten, people would think you were a princess."

The girl from the coast took lessons in embroidery, lace-making and needle-craft. All her teachers were pleased by her skill and neatness. (Toer, 1991; 43-44)

The presence of modernism in Indonesia has close relation with the Dutch colonialism. In its effort to change the traditional values, modernism also absorbs the local culture. Therefore, it succeeded to renew the traditional doctrines and values, such as, the change of privileged people values before and after the arrival of the Dutch to Indonesia. In the previous time, from Hinduism era to Islamic era, the privileged was taken from genetics origin and wealth that determined to be member of privileged class. Then, after the Dutch colonized Indonesia, particularly after the Dutch government applied ethics politics and liberal politics, education also became the point to have the position as the privileged class.

The Eastern people favored cultural dynamism, something they perceived in western culture, a culture they regarded as already 'universal'. It was in the cities where those educated in modern Dutch schools mainly gathered. By virtue of their education, career trajectories, and geographical location, this modernizing, western-inclined elite would have been somewhat removed and alienated from most of their rural compatriots (Bodden, 2007: 69-70). We can see this phenomenon in the novel when *Bendoro* asked the Girl to tell him about her fishing village (Toer, 1991: 22). The

Javanese privileged people lived in the city and have no idea towards the condition of the people outside of their mansion (Antlov and Cederroth, 2001: 3).

In the novel, modernism also influences the local custom. For example, the customs of the Javanese aristocrats carried out the Dutch table manner. At first, The Girl was confused with the custom that she never knows such tools she finds in the town.

Warm steaming bread, newly arrived from the bakery, lay in slices on the table. Bottles of marmalade jam, chocolate sprinkles, and treacle stood beside them. There was freshly squeezed orange juice, a plate of prawn crackers and a large dish of Dutch porridge. Steam rose from Japanese porcelain coffee pot. There were neat rows of shining silver knives, forks, and spoons. The Girl was dazzled. A silver fruit dish was particularly bright. She was hungry. But what were all these gleaming instrument for? And why were there were so many of them?

.....
The Girl shivered. She did not know which was the chocolate sprinkles, which treacle, and which the marmalade. (Toer, 1991: 23)

She got accustomed to eat freely in her village without strict rules, although the food was not delicious. However, she could not eat the food in the mansion, for there were many invisible hands that stopped her to behave as she did in the village. In her village, she could only find corn (Toer, 1991: 22) as their staple food with limited tools of eating and without any rule how to behave at the dining table. The corn, symbol of the villagers' way of life that rely much on the nature, is dissimilar from the products of modernism such as bread, orange juice, prawn crackers, Dutch porridge, chocolate sprinkles, treacle, and marmalade. Yet, after learning from her servant, she eventually gets accustomed to the way of life in the town equipped with modern tools. She is able to accept the western standards as something natural as she could make use of them: "The Girl of the Coast slowly grew used to a life in which there were many facilities to make her work easier." (Toer, 1991: 43)

To some extent, the displacement of modernism towards naturalism reached its consensus dealing with education, modern tools, and table manner; nonetheless, there is also value that does not reach a consensus related with the practice of feudalism. This value has existed in Indonesia before the arrival of the Dutch; however, the Dutch made use of it since it could preserve the position of the Dutch to be the highest social rank in the society. The villagers still believe that the power of the sea (nature) is more human than the power of the Javanese nobility in the feudal system. The aristocracy power often causes suffering to the commoners and order many services from the inferior class, whilst, the sea provides them source of life.

To maintain the upper class people position, they used symbol such as *Wayang*, which contains many stories illustrating the services done by the commoners, as a form of subordination of the privileged people towards the commoners. Therefore, the villagers as the commoners do not like *wayang* as the symbol to perpetuate the superior class. In Javanese cultural perspective, *wayang* as an art contains characters of Gods, kings, princes, and servants or clowns (the typical individuals treated like subhuman beings), and relationship among them. The

Javanese people in the city believe that *wayang* is their ancestor as it is the sea for the villagers. The dislike of the villagers towards *wayang* can be seen through The Girl's story to *mBok* – her female servant.

"People in fishing villages won't even say the word 'wayang', *mBok*. They don't like it at all."

"They don't understand, Mas Nganten. The puppets are our ancestors."

"Our ancestors are dead, *mBok*. The sea goes on forever." (Toer, 1991: 86)

In addition, when the Girl's father sees her daughter divorced and discarded by *Bendoro* in such a way as if her daughter is subhuman being, he is getting more certain that the power of the sea much more reliable and human than the power of the Javanese aristocrats as the human themselves. He has given his daughter to *Bendoro* as a form of service and devotion of the oppressed class to the superior class without resistance; however, what they get is only humiliating and oppression. In the following quotation, the Girl said that the sea gives the villagers sources of life, yet sometimes it may be cruel to the people when the weather is bad. The sea may make people sink, or the shark may attack them when they are sailing in the sea. However, the sea never torments the people like what the upper class people do to the subaltern people.

"There's a saying in my village, *mBok*: The sea feeds us, but it is always cruel too."

"It may be cruel, Mas Nganten, but doesn't torture people."

"That's true. My father says we owe to the sea a debt, and it insists that the debt be paid in full. That's all. You're right, my father never said that the sea tortures us." ... (Toer, 1991: 39)

Closing Remarks

One of Indonesia's most censored writers, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, has proved through his novel *The Girl from the Coast* that fiction may offer a compelling window into Eastern world, especially Indonesia. In this paper, the fiction can reveal the complexities of Indonesian experiences and values for general readers and new audiences, for instance, those who are interested in learning about the life in the Dutch East Indies when colonial power was in its apex. In this novel, the author depicts the intersection and displacement of traditional worldviews with modern worldviews, which make his work, becomes a good material for those who have little exposure to international cross-cultural matters since it addresses the intersection of modern and traditional worldviews. Using fiction to introduce about Indonesia may help the readers to learn about cultural differences and to question their fixity, think about the expanse and limits of modern experience, and place Indonesia into a larger analytic frame.

The main character in the novel, The Girl, is the representative of Eastern people who tried to adjust with the western values. The displacement of modernity brought by the Dutch towards naturalism practiced by Indonesian people in the novel reach its success in certain points such as education, table manner, and sophisticated devices to make the work effortless. These values change the worldview of the villagers, particularly the Girl, who has big dependency towards the nature. In spite of this, the value of feudalism preserved by the Dutch from Indonesian values could not

reach the consensus since for the villagers; the power of the sea is more reliable than the power of the aristocrats. The sea is sometimes cruel, but it does not torture the people as what the privileged people do the common people.

From the previous analysis, we can see that through his characters, especially the girl, Pramoedya depicts the way Indonesian people negotiate the displacements of modernity over naturalism. The Girl's curiosity and empathy lead her to observe her surroundings in ethnographic manner. In the dialogues wither female servant, her father, and with herself, she questions and describes the worlds of both nobility and commoners, each represents modernity and naturalism. Through her perspective regarding to her village, the readers can hear the sounds of village life, such as social interaction, ritual performance, etc. and grasp its significance. Pedagogically, this fictional work thus provides not only socio-cultural information but also more importantly, a sense of people engaged in (re)interpreting their own experience.

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