

Guerrilla Resistance: *Sitti Nurbaya* and Balai Pustaka's

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ABSTRACT

Censorship, a tool of cultural hegemony often employed by colonizers, was practiced by the Dutch colonials in the Dutch East Indies through the people's reading commission or Balai Pustaka, as evidenced in the Nota Rinkes, which prohibited literary works with subversive political content, religious sentiments, and immoral themes. This study explores the content of the novel *Sitti Nurbaya*, a prominent publication from Balai Pustaka, using a postcolonial approach and Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony as analytical tools. The findings reveal that *Sitti Nurbaya* contains elements of progressive politics through the Belasting riots, intense religious sentiment in defense of Adat teachings, and characters with flawed morals. Consequently, it is concluded that *Sitti Nurbaya* managed to circumvent Balai Pustaka's censorship and functioned as an organic intellectual, sparking anti-colonial awareness.

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Introduction

The perception of literary works as autonomous realms divorced from real-world issues—referred to as "art for art's sake"—is a common perspective. Nevertheless, certain entities, particularly authorities, view literary works as potent tools for inciting societal thoughts and actions, transforming them into mediums of struggle (Kurniawan, 2006). In this context, the consumption of literary works by colonized individuals becomes a battleground where these creations must conform to the interests and agendas of those in power.

Foucault (1972) posited that words, utterances, or images within literary works have the capacity to shape a discourse of truth. Consequently, authorities often exert control over literary creations, ensuring that the truths depicted and absorbed by the colonized align with their specific objectives. The significance of managing the production, distribution, and

consumption of this truth lies in the acquisition of moral and intellectual leadership. This form of leadership, as articulated by Gramsci (1971), enables those in power to garner approval and support from their constituents without resorting to overt violence. Culture emerges as a pivotal agent in directing moral leadership within society, illustrating its role as a powerful tool wielded by authorities to shape narratives and influence collective perceptions.

Culture, including literature, functions as a form of intellectual politics tasked with shaping societal thought. Literature plays a crucial role in the cultivation of intellect, the acquisition of ideas, and the development of the capacity to discern cause and effect. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that Gramsci placed considerable emphasis on the pivotal role of culture in revolutionary practice, as highlighted by Hartley (1987). Gramsci's recognition underscores the profound influence of cultural elements, especially literature, in molding minds and contributing to the transformative dynamics within a society engaged in revolutionary pursuits.

Literary censorship emerges as a tool employed by ruling factions to suppress information and facts associated with the contemporary colonial landscape within works of fiction. Its objective extends beyond mere concealment, seeking to craft a fictional narrative portraying a world of peace and order aligned with the prevailing colonial climate (Gouda, 2008). Through this mechanism, those in power exert control over the information accessible to oppressed communities, shaping their perception of reality. Consequently, the subordinate group, subjected to this selective filtration, perpetuates a cycle of submission, consistently granting consent to the invaders to persist in their business.

This paper examines the strategies employed by the novel *Sitti Nurbaya* in navigating the endeavors of Dutch colonial domination to establish moral and intellectual leadership through the censorship of literary works. Balai Pustaka, also known as the Commissie voor de Volkslectuur, served as a commission dedicated to supplying quality reading materials to the populace of the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) during the colonial era. Despite its aim to offer valuable literature, Balai Pustaka operated within the confines of strict guidelines, ensuring that the provided materials remained in line with prevailing power structures and did not elicit moral decay within society (Fitzpatrick, 2000). This commitment to orderliness led to the implementation of a rigorous censorship policy, particularly concerning the publication of literary works, which were experiencing a growing demand among the public during that period (Isa, 1972).

Despite currently the Balai Pustaka publishing house no longer being under Dutch control, the residual impact of colonialism persists within the contents of its literary works. Evaluating

whether a piece is still influenced by colonial cultural hegemony involves examining its alignment with colonial guidelines. In the early stages of Balai Pustaka under the Dutch East Indies colonial government, indications of colonial influence were evident in the Nota Rinkes (Nota over de Volkslectuur). This Rinkes Note outlined strict criteria, refraining from publishing literary works that featured disruptive political elements, religious sentiments, or moral degradation (Yamamoto, 2019).

Numerous prior studies have shed light on Balai Pustaka's censorship policy, unveiling several critiques. One line of criticism emphasizes the suppression of resistance attitudes among indigenous authors, particularly Bumiputra (Indonesian natives), as Balai Pustaka clashed ideologically with government perspectives, actively resisting the politics of literature within indigenous works (Farid & Razif, 2008; Anwar, 2020). Another notable critique centers on the publishing house's active promotion of Western cultural values and norms, as reflected in its book selection and publications that often depicted the Dutch as superior and indigenous people as inferior (Jedamski, 1992). Additionally, accusations were leveled against Balai Pustaka for imposing hegemonic control over literary works, establishing aesthetic and ideological standards that marginalized alternative perspectives and voices (Sulistyo & Sartika, 2020). This form of censorship was viewed as a tool to uphold the power and dominance of the Dutch East Indies government, thereby restricting freedom of expression and stifling diversity within Indonesian literature (Kuitert, 2021; Artawan, 2016).

Sitti Nurbaya novel, traditionally regarded as a reactionary literary work addressing political concerns such as anti-colonialism and the erosion of Minangkabau customs, is the subject of this paper's exploration into an alternative perspective. Contrary to prevailing views, the argument put forth here posits that *Sitti Nurbaya* was, in fact, a progressive piece for its era. The investigation has uncovered noteworthy gaps in evidence that substantiate this claim, offering a nuanced understanding of the novel's ideological stance and challenging conventional interpretations of its socio-political implications.

Method

This research employs a qualitative research design to conduct an extensive analysis and interpretation of selected texts, utilizing qualitative textual analysis methods. The study aligns with the theoretical framework of postcolonial theory and the concept of cultural hegemony. To get more detailed analysis, the examination of cultural hegemony in this study is specifically focused on its manifestation through censorship procedures.

The primary data source for this study is the classic Indonesian novel, *Sitti Nurbaya* (2018) written in Indonesian by Marah Rusli. Renowned for his exceptional contributions to modern

Indonesian literature, Marah Rusli's works mark a significant milestone in the literary landscape. *Sitti Nurbaya* is particularly notable, recognized as "the first modern Indonesian literature" (John, 1979) and esteemed as "the most popular literary reading in the Balai Pustaka era" (Sutherland, 1967). The choice of this novel as the focal point of analysis underlines its important role in shaping and defining public perceptions regarding acceptable literature from the perspective of the colonial publisher, Balai Pustaka at that time.

Sitti Nurbaya primarily centered around the love struggles of the protagonists, Nurbaya and Samsulbahri. The narrative also delivers pointed critiques of the shortcomings inherent in Minangkabau customs. Despite its romantic facade, the novel assumes historical significance by incorporating the backdrop of the Belasting riots, portraying the indigenous people's opposition to Dutch colonial tax policies. This dual narrative structure intertwines romance with historical resistance, adding layers of complexity to the novel's portrayal and suggesting a nuanced interplay between personal relationships and broader socio-political contexts.

Utilizing the method advocated by Greenham (2018), this study employed close reading as the primary means of data collection. Through this method, researchers systematically recorded various excerpts from the selected texts, specifically focusing on instances revealing cultural hegemony and resistance to it. The identified extracts were then meticulously categorized based on emerging patterns, resulting in a thematic classification of the data.

The subsequent analysis involved a thorough examination of the identified patterns in conjunction with the relevant extracts. The resulting patterns were contextualized within the microtheory framework concerning Balai Pustaka's censorship methods, as manifested in the *Nota Rinkes*. It's important to note that the research findings and results are presented in a qualitative form, articulated through words and sentences rather than numerical data, capturing the nuanced complexities of cultural dynamics and resistance within the examined literary context.

Results and Discussion

In the latest edition, *Sitti Nurbaya* (2018) novel's deviations from the guidelines outlined in the Rinkes note (*Nota over de Volkslectuur*) were identified. Notably, the novel achieved an inclusion of progressive political elements, dynamic character portrayals, and conflicts rooted in religious differences. Politically, the narrative delves into the Minangkabau people's rebellion against Dutch tax policies in the early 20th century. Morally, the novel introduces a main character who defies conventional expectations, displaying traits of wildness and treachery. The religious perspective within the novel intensifies as it portrays a fierce and

significant conflict between Islam and non-Islam, adding a layer of complexity to the socio-cultural narrative. These findings underscore the novel's departure from the norms established by Rinkes notes, infiltrating elements that challenge political, moral and religious boundaries in an underground or guerrilla manner.

A fair portrait of the Belasting Rebellion as anti-colonialism spirit

While classified within the romance genre, the novel *Sitti Nurbaya* does not entirely divorce itself from the societal issues enveloping its narrative. Specifically, the backdrop of a significant political event in West Sumatra, known as the Belasting battle, persists throughout the storyline. This historical event encapsulates a physical clash between the Minangkabau tribe and the Dutch army, colloquially recognized as “the Kamang war” (Saidi, 2014). The narrative of *Sitti Nurbaya* intricately weaves the Belasting rebellion into its thematic fabric, positioning it as both the initial and concluding stage of a direct confrontation between the principal characters, Dt Meringgih and Samsulbahri. The climax and denouement of *Sitti Nurbaya* unfold within the framework of this pivotal battle, thus lending a historical and societal depth to the romantic narrative.

The portrayal of the Belasting battle constitutes a pivotal aspect in assessing whether *Sitti Nurbaya* novel intentionally incorporates political elements. If the depiction of Belasting serves merely as a backdrop for a dramatic battle, its role remains confined to a complementary narrative device. Conversely, if the Belasting issue encapsulates values that evoke the spirit of class struggle and anti-colonialism, it signifies a purposeful integration of political dimensions within the narrative. The discernment of such intentional elements is crucial for a nuanced understanding of the novel's socio-political implications.

As indicated in the table of contents, the Belasting scene is encapsulated within two chapters, namely chapters XV and XVI. To elaborate, the discourse on Belasting spans from page 321 to 348. The meticulous examination of various segments and details pertaining to the depiction of the Belasting case underscores its significant thematic relevance within the book, warranting a comprehensive and detailed exploration.

In addition to providing a detailed and comprehensive depiction of the Belasting incident, *Sitti Nurbaya* novel also captures significant facets of Minangkabau culture, particularly the practices of deliberation and consensus in decision-making. When the Minangkabau community faces the need to collectively assert a position, they resort to convening in a deliberation forum. This cultural norm is exemplified in the novel through a scene featuring Dt Meringgih's speech, as depicted below:

"The reason why we asked ninik mamak, brothers and sisters, all relatives to come, gathered here tonight, is because we want to discuss the new regulations that the Company will impose on us, namely the payment of belasting money." (p.330)

The Minangkabau people's historical inclination toward seeking consensus through assemblies is deeply embedded in their cultural identity. This inclination is encapsulated in the proverb "*bulek aia dek pambuluah, bulek kato dek mufakaik*" / "The joining of water due to vessels, unity of opinion because of mutual agreement." For decisions with profound implications on public life, community deliberations involving representatives such as pilgrims, pious individuals, religious teachers, and elders are customary (p.330). Various venues, including *Kursi nan Salapan* (eight benches), *Medan Nan Bapaneh* (outdoor court), *Medan Nan Balinduang* (indoor court), *Balai Nan Saruang* (indoor hall), and *Pamedanan* (open field), have historically served as assembly locations (Christyawaty & Susilowati, 2010). The sustained utilization and development of these venues underscore the enduring nature of the deliberative culture, persisting across generations to the present day.

In addition to faithfully depicting local customs and traditions, *Sitti Nurbaya* novel intricately weaves local contexts into the Belasting case, highlighting the incorporation of mysticism in the Belasting riot. This is exemplified by a Haji's statement on the utilization of magic in war, drawing a parallel with the Acehese practice: "Imitate what Acehese used: they opposed rifles and cannons with 'isim' verses taken from the Holy Quran, so that the guns did not fire, nor did their bullets hit, nor did swords cleave flesh" (p.334). The term "isim" refers to the name of God, typically employed in mantras (KBBI). Through the invocation of such mystical practices, weapons like cannons and swords utilized by the Dutch army were believed to be rendered ineffective. This knowledge was inspired by the Acehese success in resisting Dutch forces, as reflected in the statement, "Look at the Acehese! What weapons do they have? They are able to resist and still haven't been subdued" (p.334).

The documented close relationship between the Minangkabau and Aceh people within the book aligns with historical realities. The Minangkabau and Aceh communities, two tribes with enduring ties, have cultivated this connection through the propagation and education of the Islamic religion in Sumatra (Harun, 2004) and through active trade engagements (Iswanto et.al, 2022). Notably, the renowned Minangkabau cleric Sheikh Burhanuddin, was a disciple of the Acehese cleric Sheikh Abdur Rauf As Singkili (Arif, 2020). Given this historical interconnection, it is unsurprising that many Minangkabau sought assistance from the Acehese in resisting Dutch colonialism, leveraging practices such as the utilization of "isim" (magic spells).

Aside from meticulously documenting the customs and habits of the local populace, the Belasting case significantly influences the narrative. Within this fiscal context, the conflicting motivations of the two characters, Dt. Meringgih and Samsulbahri, are distinctly articulated. However, it is noteworthy that the elucidation of these characters' motivations employs a slightly nuanced approach.

Dt Meringgih's primary motivation for engaging in the Belasting riots stemmed from his personal grievance against the Dutch, as elucidated by the narrator: "Datuk Meringgih knew this, that is why his heart was very hot towards the Dutch Government. At that time, because there is a way, he will avenge this hurt" (p.331). Concurrently, during this period, the Dutch government harbored suspicions regarding Dt Meringgih's involvement in illicit activities, such as "counterfeiting money" (p.115). Faced with the disruption of a business that had rendered him affluent for years, Dt Meringgih's frustration intensified. Consequently, he mobilized the populace to resist the Dutch, aiming to safeguard their properties from potential confiscation by the colonial authorities.

On an alternative note, Samsulhari's involvement in the Belasting case can be attributed to an official directive from his superiors. Samsul and Van Sta received instructions from a superior, as stated: "I have orders for you two, along with your soldiers, to immediately leave for Padang" (p. 318). Nevertheless, upon closer scrutiny, it becomes apparent that Samsulbahri's primary motivation for enlisting in the Dutch army was to seek a means of self-inflicted death, as he candidly revealed to Van Sta: "looking for death, I said" (p.314).

During his assignment to Padang city, Samsulbahri exhibited profound dissatisfaction and, contrary to contentment, experienced anxiety and remorse, as articulated: "I can't bear my own misery, now I am being told to kill my people" (p.319). This account illuminates Samsulbahri's internal conflict, torn between fulfilling the assigned task and pursuing personal inclinations. Eventually, Samsulbahri received an inexplicable revelation, fostering his belief that he could discharge his duties and attain the desired demise: "Now here, you will be released from your doom and now you will be able to rejoin all those you love" (p.320).

The occurrence of the Belasting riot unveils the authentic motivations of the characters: Dt Meringgih and Samsulbahri. This riot serves as a platform for showcasing the qualities inherent in these pivotal characters. Furthermore, the Belasting case functions as a critical juncture to resolve the central conflict in this romance—Tradition vs Progress, Old vs Young, East vs West. The setting of the Belasting riots holds substantial importance in advancing the narrative and elucidating the causality and ramifications stemming from this conflict.

The Belasting riot engendered two divergent perspectives that culminated in disparate conclusions. Examining it from an indigenous standpoint, Dt Meringgih's involvement in the

Belasting riots has the potential to alter readers' perceptions. Dt Meringgih is portrayed as a defender of indigenous interests against Dutch colonialism, evident in the exclamation "Taste my hand, Dutch dog!" (p.346). Notably, in the preceding 14 chapters leading up to the Belasting case, the character Dt Meringgih has consistently been portrayed in a negative light. This underscores the predominantly unfavorable presentation of the character Dt Meringgih to the reader.

Aside from being regarded as a figure of patriotism and heroism with an anti-colonial ethos, Dt Meringgih also exemplifies the pinnacle of spiritual attainment as a Muslim—manifested through repentance for his transgressions. The narrative portrays Dt Meringgih experiencing remorse at the precipice of death; "regret arose in his heart over what he had done in the past" (p.346). Dt Meringgih's expression of regret constitutes a distinctive spiritual phenomenon, attainable by a select few. In certain instances, such remorse is akin to receiving a revelation for individuals deemed saintly.

The occurrence of the Belasting riots brought to light an additional facet of Dt Meringgih's character, thereby rendering his characterization more comprehensive as a depiction of a typical human possessing both virtuous and malevolent qualities. Prior to the Belasting affair, Dt Meringgih had been unequivocally portrayed as inherently malicious. The evolution in Dt Meringgih's characterization underscores that the Belasting case scene serves a more profound purpose beyond serving as a mere embellishment to the narrative.

From an alternative perspective, it becomes evident that the narrator exhibits a bias towards the character Samsulbahri. Throughout the narrative, Samsulbahri is consistently portrayed as an upright and astute individual, described as "not just bright, but also courteous, refined in speech and manners, straightforward, and trustworthy" (p.8). Despite Samsulbahri committing significant errors, such as attempting suicide (p.300) and enlisting as a Dutch soldier (p.314), his funeral procession is conducted with the regality befitting a nobleman, symbolized by "the covering of the body with yellow parasols—a traditional marker of aristocratic demise" (p.354). Additionally, Samsulbahri is eulogized as both a hero, highlighted by his military rank as Lieutenant Mas adorned with stars for bravery, and as a respected figure who assisted the Government in various wartime challenges (p.355).

Nevertheless, the positive impression readers may have towards the character of Samsulbahri is compromised through the Belasting riot, as evidenced by moments where Samsulbahri expresses remorse for his involvement in the killing of his own people: "Isn't my punishment enough, after being tortured like this? Never mind that I can't bear my own misery, now I'm being told to kill my people" (p.319). Samsulbahri's participation in these heinous acts

is driven by personal motives: "Because I was forced to do this, to get my death" (p.319). While the narrator may guide readers to respect and admire Samsulbahri's struggle in the narrative, native readers, particularly those who perceive his actions as betrayal of homeland and defense of colonial interests, may not extend this sympathy. This underscores the pivotal role of the Belasting riots in exposing the pseudo-heroism attributed to Samsul Bahri in the book.

Vulnerable Personality of the Main Character

According to the Rinkes note, the second essential criterion for publishing a literary work at Balai Pustaka is to enhance intellectual development and offer character education (Teeuw, 1972). However, during that period, the precise moral parameters envisaged by Balai Pustaka were not clearly defined. Rinkes did not specify any explicit constraints on this aspect.

One of the manuscripts subjected to censorship under the pretext of moral degradation is *Salah Asuhan* by Abdul Muis. The targeted character in this romance is Corrie (Tickel, 1982). Originally portrayed as a Dutch national with unfavorable traits (disorderly and greedy) working as a prostitute, the Balai Pustaka editor significantly altered Corrie's character in the edited manuscript. The revised depiction transformed Corrie into an educated, gentle, and understanding half-breed (Indo-French) female character. The initial portrayal of Corrie's character, deemed non-ideal and lacking in educational value, was modified to align with societal moral standards.

It is noteworthy that *Sitti Nurbaya* was published despite featuring less stereotypical main characters, exemplified by the two central figures in the narrative. The first character is Sitti Nurbaya, initially portrayed as an ideal young woman of her era. The narrator provides a comprehensive description of Nurbaya, encompassing not only her physical beauty but also her behavior, customs, orderliness, politeness, and benevolent nature (p.8). Sitti Nurbaya (hereafter Nur) is emblematic of perfection, both in terms of her physical attributes and social standing. As the sole heir of a prosperous merchant in Padang (p.8), Nur holds a position of respect and is well-educated. Additionally, she maintains friendships with individuals of comparable social standing, solidifying her role as a paragon for young women at that time.

As the storyline progresses and Nur's life takes a different trajectory, her characterization undergoes a notable transformation, particularly after her marriage to Dt Meringgih. Following her father's demise, Nur forcefully expelled Dt Meringgih from her residence, expressing her actions with derogatory remarks: "Because I am in charge in this house, I will chase you away like a dog" (p.119). Additionally, she displayed physical aggression by boldly approaching Dt Meringgih and striking him with a doorstep (p. 120). Nur's conduct deviates from the expected demeanor of an ideal woman characterized by grace and gentleness.

Nur consistently disregarded her marital commitment to Dt Meringgih. Upon Sam's return

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from Jakarta, Nur continued to engage in intimate behavior with Sam as if they were an unattached couple: "Nurbaya was overcome with emotion and leaned forward, embracing Samsu and kissing his cheek. Samsu reciprocated her kiss with his own ardent embrace" (p.195). Importantly, Nur's actions occurred while she was still married to Dt Meringgih and not a virgin. This behavior constitutes a breach of spousal trust and compromises the sanctity of the marital bond.

On a separate occasion, Nur boldly made the decision to pursue her lover, Samsu, to Jakarta. Unfazed by potential obstacles, Nur expressed her fearlessness, stating, "I'm not afraid, even if I go into a sea of fire, I'm brave, as long as I can meet him" (p.219). While Nur's determination to reclaim her love is emotionally compelling, it deviates from societal norms, considering that she was still the legal wife of Dt Meringgih at the time.

In addition to displaying inappropriate, rude, and disrespectful behavior, Nur is also portrayed as a fragile character. When faced with difficulties affecting her and her family, Nur gradually loses control, expressing, "My heart is not like that; only because my brain, which has become sick since I was beset by this danger, my thoughts are always incoherent." The accumulation of hardships prompts Nur to contemplate suicide, revealing, "Often evil intentions came to tempt my heart, namely wanting to kill myself, so that I could quickly escape from this torment" (p.185). Nur is depicted as unable to maintain emotional composure and fortitude when confronting life's challenges.

Nur's death, caused by poisoning arranged by Dt Meringgih's men, does not erase the memory of her dishonest and treacherous behavior during her marriage to Dt Meringgih. While Nur may be perceived as an ideal figure from a Western standpoint due to her intelligence, bravery, critical thinking, and education, native readers view her as a wife characterized by rudeness, disobedience, treachery, and fragility.

Another prominent character, Samsulbahri, fails to embody the expected moral ideals in *Sitti Nurbaya*. Initially presented as intelligent, kind, polite, and genteel due to his prestigious background as the son of Padang's esteemed Sutan Mahmud (p.8), there is an initial expectation that he would serve as a commendable moral exemplar. It was anticipated that Samsulbahri could impart valuable lessons on character education and refine manners.

Similarly to Nur's character, Samsulbahri's initially pristine image in the story undergoes degradation due to inappropriate behavior. This transformation occurs during Samsu and Nur's intimate encounter at Samsulbahri's farewell party. Samsu initiates physical contact by kissing Nur's hand, stating, "then Samsu slowly kissed the back of this virgin's hand" (p.89). Subsequently, he embraces Nur, expressing, "now there is no doubt or doubt that I will leave

the city of Padang, to go to another country, Nurbaya!" while embracing her (p.93). Further compromising his moral standing, Samsu kisses Nur again, stating, "if you weren't there, it would be forbidden for me to have other women," and proceeds to kiss Nurbaya as well (p.93).

Nur and Samsu's romance persist despite Nur being married to Dt Meringgih. Their relationship was directly observed by Dt Meringgih: "It wasn't to take care of your father, like you said, but to have fun with your lover" (p.195). Samsu's presumptuous actions, as expressed by Dt Meringgih, have besmirched the reputation of the Young Generation: "The progress of young people apparently does not elevate their status; it will even take them from a noble place to a lowly place, tarnishing the fragrant name of their ancestors and eroding the dignity and glory of women" (p.195). This display of affection between Nur and Samsu, while deemed normal in European contexts, is considered unacceptable from the perspective of the Minangkabau people.

In addition to transgressing customs and politeness, the character of Samsulbahri also lacks strength and steadfastness. Upon learning of Nur's death, Samsulbahri immediately contemplates suicide. Disowned by his father, with his mother and Nur no longer in his life, Samsu perceives himself as an orphan, bereft of family, hometown, or homeland: "now I am an orphan, without a mother, without a father, without relatives, without folks, without a hometown or a homeland anymore" (p.291). Samsul Bahri believes that by ending his life, he can escape the sufferings brought by the misfortunes in his life: "instead of living in the mirror of a corpse, it would be better to die on the ground" (p.291).

Similarly, to Nur, Samsulbahri struggled to reconcile with the harsh reality that diverged from societal expectations. Both characters opted for the same tragic resolution: suicide. From a European perspective, suicide is neither encouraged nor considered educational. Consequently, the two young characters, initially championed as agents of character building and ethics, ultimately failed in fulfilling their intended roles.

Balai Pustaka realized the potential of literature as a vehicle for ethical education and character development. The incorporation of certain ethics into literature aimed to reinforce the values upheld by the priyayi (noblemen). By highlighting the ethics of the priyayi, the aim was to encourage the public to act in accordance with these principles and cooperate, like the priyayi class, with the Dutch government.

Furthermore, the imposition of moral constraints in Balai Pustaka publications served as a counter-discourse to readings released by private publishers, often labeled as subversive or "wild publication." These publications outside of Balai Pustaka employed colloquial and egalitarian low Malay language (Taum, 2014). Such values were deemed to contaminate the intellectual framework of the general populace and undermine the established hierarchical

tradition between the dominators (Dutch) and the subjugated (indigenous).

Literary works devoid of moral values and positive character portrayals are deemed hazardous, intentionally showcasing behaviors that challenge established moral norms within society. Such practices may lead to broader consequences, including defiance of the Dutch government's directives. Consequently, Balai Pustaka aims to publish literary works that do not instigate native populations to rebel, behave disruptively, or show ingratitude towards the Dutch, who played a role in organizing and governing the native communities. This objective is intricately linked to the colonial concept of "rust en orde" (order and security), crucial for maintaining colonial authority over its territories (Setiadi, 1991).

Religious Sentiment through Adat Practices

Rinkes underscores a third crucial aspect, emphasizing the necessity to eschew religious sentiments in publications. In the context of *Sitti Nurbaya*, religious elements permeate diverse conversational domains, including customs, education, marriage, childcare, inheritance, invulnerability, and war directives. Noteworthy are discussions involving religion, where native speakers openly render deliberate judgments on other faiths, with the explicit aim of safeguarding the sanctity of their customs.

Religious elements are integral to discussions within *Sitti Nurbaya*, notably in the discourse surrounding the marriage of two indigenous figures, St. Mahmud and his sister Rubiah. St. Mahmud, during this period, conveyed his intention to marry his beloved, a proposition met with resistance from his sister. Rubiah expressed apprehension, stating, "It is true that your customs and behavior have changed. It won't be long before you will exchange your religion for Christianity" (p. 19). Rubiah criticized her brother for deviating from traditional teachings, alleging a conversion to Christianity. From Rubiah's standpoint, indigenous logic is evident, linking custom and religion as a unified entity. Non-adherence to Minangkabau traditional customs is perceived as synonymous with a religious conversion from Islam.

A parallel scenario unfolds involving distinct characters, Fatimah and her husband, Ahmad Maulana. Maulana, echoing St. Mahmud's sentiments, posited that marriage should prioritize love and affection over rank and lineage, akin to European customs. Fatimah swiftly dismissed this viewpoint, deeming it heretical, and remarked, "Ah, why do we follow these infidel customs" (p. 251). Consistent with Rubiah's rationale, Fatimah associates Western culture with infidel customs, maintaining a perspective that culture and religious teachings are intertwined.

Characters like St. Mahmud and Ahmad Maulana represent indigenous individuals grappling with the tension between traditional conservatism and Western modernization. They depart from certain traditional norms related to marriage, child care, and inheritance.

Maulana candidly acknowledges the imperfections in Minangkabau customs, stating, "Many of our customs and rules are good, but there are also some that are wrong" (p.252). Consequently, they express a willingness to adopt positive aspects from Western culture, questioning, "What's wrong with imitating the good customs of other nations and discarding our bad customs?" (p.252). This reflects their openness to embracing beneficial elements from Western culture while critically evaluating their own traditions.

The tension between Eastern and Western cultures in the *Sitti Nurbaya* novel highlights the significant role of religious elements. When a native expresses a desire to adopt Western culture and forsake Minangkabau customs, opposing characters invoke the power of religion to safeguard the sanctity of these traditions. This alignment between custom and religion is emphasized in the proverb: "*Adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi kitabullah*/ Customs are based on religion, religion is based on the Koran" (Abdullah, 1966). Consequently, for someone from the Minangkabau tribe, adhering to Western teachings implies a departure from their religious beliefs. The inclusion of religious elements in the novel is pivotal for preserving Minangkabau traditional teachings against the pressures of Western modernization.

The religious elements in *Sitti Nurbaya* serve not only as protectors of the purity of Minangkabau customs but also as motivation in anti-colonial resistance. In the Belasting rebellion, religion played a significant role as a unifying force in the mass movement. During a large gathering at the mosque, a Haji figure expresses his thoughts:

"It is indeed troublesome to be under the command of a heathen; we will forever be persecuted. In the end, they will certainly exchange our religion with Christianity, so that we will become heathens and enter hellfire like them. Of course, they are not happy to see us go to heaven; so, they are looking for dead friends." (p.332)

The character Haji in the novel equates the Dutch administration with a Christian-based administration, suggesting that their aim is to persecute and condemn the Minangkabau people (Muslims) to hell. This biased statement serves to motivate the audience to resist and oppose all colonial government policies, framing the act of resistance as defending the banner of Islam against the deceit of non-believers.

Supernatural powers rooted in religious teachings were employed to bolster the morale of the indigenous people in confronting the Dutch army. Initially hesitant fighters were emboldened by a Hajj who empowered them with mantras (*isim*) to repel sophisticated Dutch weaponry. At the onset of the battle, the indigenous troops felt invincible, as they seemed impervious to bullets due to "the magic they obtained from their teacher" (p.342). To further bolster their spirits, the fighters chanted *tahlil* and launched an offensive. However, during the second attack, the amulet failed, leading to "a row of people in front fell to the ground" (p.342).

This occurrence serves to illustrate the potential of religion to instill confidence and enthusiasm in indigenous fighters.

From these two situations, it can be inferred that the Belasting war transcended mere resistance to tax payments. The conflict against the Dutch was likened to a war against non-believers or a Holy War (Fogg, 2020). Similar to the Acehnese, the spirit of the indigenous fighters was believed to be rooted in religious conviction, making this war a matter of faith (Siegel, 2014). The strong religious underpinnings in justifying resistance, motivating fighters, and providing moral support are skillfully interwoven into the narrative of the romance *Sitti Nurbaya*, creating a natural and unobtrusive storyline.

Prohibiting the discussion of religion in public spaces, including literary works, constitutes a form of covert censorship. Such restrictions can lead to awkward and disjointed narratives. In Minangkabau society, religion and adat (custom) are intertwined, as reflected in the saying “*Syara’ mangato, Adat mamakai/Religion says, Adat realizes.*” This implies that religion forms the foundation of thought, while custom embodies action.

The policy of excluding religious elements is believed to have originated from Rinke, a student of the Dutch native affairs advisor, Snouck Hurgronje. Hurgronje’s theory posits that the Dutch promotion of the relationship between religion and modernization is a “zero-sum game” (Jung, 2010). He suggested separating Islam from the political sphere as part of a modernization policy to confine religion to the private domain.

Hurgronje believes that relegating religion, particularly Islam, to a non-political space and pitting it against the secular knowledge disseminated by the new education system would lead to a diminishing relevance of Islam in society. This belief is based on the assumption that modern society must be secular, and thus, the task of modernization policy is to confine religion to the private sphere (Pollack and Rosta, 2017). Hurgronje’s proposal to separate the religious and political spheres in colonial politics was a significant step in the endeavor to assume moral and intellectual leadership in the Dutch East Indies.

Conclusion

Sitti Nurbaya is widely regarded as one of the finest literary works published by Balai Pustaka. However, this accolade does not necessarily align this romance with Dutch interests, challenging its role as a cultural agent obedient to colonial agendas. *Sitti Nurbaya* serves as a significant political and moral commentary, highlighting the Belasting event as a trigger for public awareness in the spirit of anti-colonialism. The young Western-educated characters fail to be portrayed as role models for the indigenous people due to their serious moral flaws. The

book successfully employs religious teachings as a protector of Eastern culture from Western cultural undermining and as an additional motivation in carrying out the war against the Dutch. Through the incorporation of these three elements, the novel effectively engages in guerrilla resistance against the discourse of colonialism propagated by the Dutch colonialists through the literary works published by Balai Pustaka. Overall, *Sitti Nurbaya* is an arena of identity tensions, character complexities, and socio-political dynamics under colonial rule, rather than a reflection of the dominant ideology set by Balai Pustaka.

Declarations

- Author contribution** : Muhammad Adek was responsible for the entire research project. He also led the writing of the manuscript and the collaboration with the second author. Nesa Riska Pangesti participated in the data collection, transcription, and analysis. Siska Miga Dewi editing final manuscript. Both authors approved the final manuscript.
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