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From Pramoedya to Ngendon: Interpreting Social Realism and Indonesian Cultural Nationalism from a Distance of Closest Approach

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ABSTRACT

This article compares expressions of Indonesian cultural nationalism through two figures from distinct creative mediums: Pramoedya Ananta Toer in literature and I Nyoman Ngendon in the visual arts. Pramoedya, through his novel *This Earth of Mankind* and his steadfast resolve in voicing social injustice, and Ngendon, through paintings that parallel his role as a guerrilla fighter, both reflect the spirit of social realism amid colonial repression. Their creative practices function as acts of resistance, awakening national consciousness and articulating collective values rooted in the zeitgeist of their time. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics, this analysis examines the relationship between narrative, biographical experience, and symbolic representation embedded in their works. The study adopts a framework grounded in the physics concept of distance of closest approach, emphasizing a nuanced reading of the proximity between artwork, social history, and the creative dynamics of both figures. Nationalism and the spirit of nationhood are thus not understood as abstract ideas alone, but as lived, internalized, and embodied experiences manifested through artistic forms within distinct social spheres.

KEYWORDS

Nationalism, Nationhood, Social Realism, Zeitgeist, Hermeneutics

Introduction: Interpreting Cultural Nationalism and Social Realism from a Distance of Closest Approach

Indonesian cultural nationalism did not emerge as a singular or monolithic discourse. Rather, it took shape through historical struggle and the expressive agency of the people across diverse terrains—language, art, mythology, and collective memory. In classical studies of nationalism, such a form is often associated with cultural nationalism: a model of nationhood grounded in shared cultural-historical identity (*ius sanguinis*), in contrast to civic nationalism, which is based on institutional and territorial affiliation (*ius soli*) [1].

Cultural nationalism, in this sense, is not limited to political rhetoric. It arises from the cultivation of culture—the sustained articulation and renewal of cultural identity

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through language, literature, history, folklore, and the arts. Historian Joep Leerssen argues that all nationalisms, in their earliest stages, are fundamentally cultural, as the nation—as a collective imagination—emerges from a shared cultural consciousness nurtured through literature, myth, and art [2].

Within Indonesia's postcolonial trajectory, cultural nationalism serves as a critical axis for shaping identity beyond the formal structures of the state. Nationhood was not forged solely through bureaucratic apparatuses but also through symbols, stories, and aesthetic expressions that resonated within the everyday lives of the people. As observed by Henk Schulte Nordholt, Indonesia's early post-independence years were marked by a tension between local pluralities and the state's aspiration for a unified national identity [3]. At this juncture, literature and art became critical arenas for articulating collective experience—emotional, symbolic, and situated.

One of the most resonant expressions of cultural nationalism is found in social realism—an artistic tendency that depicts social realities in a critical and reflective manner. Social realism is not merely a record of external conditions; it reveals structural inequalities and conflicts embedded in everyday life. It is an art form rooted in historical awareness and political alignment, appearing as an artistic form of truth that, as Forrest suggests, probes "the subtlest layers of the soul" and gives voice to truths lived in the rhythms of ordinary existence[4]. In this way, social realism is not only an aesthetic method but also an ethical position: it situates art as an instrument of consciousness and resistance.

This study is grounded in the conviction that expressions of cultural nationalism in Indonesia are not limited to state documents or political speeches, but are often embodied in literary and visual works that convey collective emotion, shared suffering, and aspirations for a more just future. It argues that literary and visual art can be interpreted as parallel forms of social documentation—recording and shaping a sense of nationhood.

Both cultural nationalism and social realism center the experience of the people—particularly the marginalized—as the narrative core and symbolic anchor. They converge within what can be described as the zeitgeist—the spirit of a historical moment as expressed through language, narrative, and form. From this perspective, literature and art may be interpreted as practices that shape an imagined community, transcending administrative and territorial boundaries, as theorized by Benedict Anderson [5].

Art and literature do not arise in a vacuum. They emerge from the textures of lived experience, shaped by history and animated by the consciousness of their time. In this regard, Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925–2006) and I Nyoman Ngendon (1913–1947) represent two figures from distinct geographies and expressive media who nonetheless

share the same historical spirit: the colonial condition, social inequality, and the struggle for independence. In their respective bodies of work, the zeitgeist is not only recorded but interpreted and transformed through aesthetic forms that affirm the people and confront dominant narratives. Although their creative timelines do not entirely overlap, both Pramoedya and Ngendon articulate social realism and express resistance through distinct yet convergent modes of cultural expression.

It is from this convergence that the theoretical grounding of this study emerges: that through social realism and cultural nationalism, both Pramoedya and Ngendon represent living voices of their time—voices that continue to resonate across generations.

Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and the conceptual metaphor of a "Distance of Closest Approach," this article compares two expressions of nationalism across different artistic media: Pramoedya's novel *This Earth of Mankind* and Ngendon's anti-colonial visual pamphlet. Both are interpreted not merely as observers of their era, but as active agents who recreate social reality through art.

Within this framework, *This Earth of Mankind* and Ngendon's visual work are not merely historical documents, but open texts that can be meaningfully interpreted through a close reading attuned to biography, symbolism, and each work's narrative structure. Both demonstrate that art can serve as a critical space for interpreting values of nationhood—not simply as the outcome of state agendas, but as living expressions shaped through cultural imagination.

In turn, this perspective views Indonesian nationalism and social realism not solely as historical or political phenomena, but as dynamic interpretive practices—requiring sensitivity to differing artistic terrains. By bringing Pramoedya and Ngendon into a shared analytical field, this article not only offers a comparative study, but also opens a space for contemplation: how Indonesian nationhood has been imagined, felt, and enacted through differing proximities and mediums—from word to image, from book to canvas.

This study proposes that cultural nationalism can be read as an experience that is affective, personal, and contextual—a process that links the individual to the collective through authentic artistic expression. In this sense, the zeitgeist becomes the point of convergence: embodied in Minke's voice challenging colonial structures, and in Ngendon's lines and colors that depict the people's spirit and courage.

Thus, this article not only presents a cross-medium reading, but also proposes an alternative approach to understanding art as a narrative of nationhood. Along the path between word and image, between text and painting, between Pramoedya and Ngendon, we are invited to reinterpret Indonesia—not as an abstract ideal, but as a

living historical experience, continually reimagined through multiple distances, angles, and artistic terrains.

Method and Approach: Interpreting the Zeitgeist Across Mediums

To interpret Indonesian cultural nationalism as an aesthetic, historical, and symbolic experience, this study adopts a cross-disciplinary interpretive approach that bridges literature and visual art, text and context, personal expression and collective meaning. The analysis focuses on two representative works from distinct creative mediums—Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *This Earth of Mankind* (originally published in 1980 by Hasta Mitra) and I Nyoman Ngendon's revolutionary visual pamphlet (1946)—both of which are interpreted as cultural texts that articulate the zeitgeist through the intertwined languages of social realism and cultural nationalism.

The zeitgeist as embedded in the works of Pramoedya and Ngendon forms the axis of this cross-medium interpretation. Both works express the historical consciousness of their respective moments—colonial-era tensions and the emerging spirit of nationalist awakening—through literary and visual expression, where nationalism is not presented as abstract ideology but experienced as lived reality. In this framework, cultural nationalism is understood as a process constantly negotiated between the personal and the collective, the aesthetic and the political, the historical and the imaginative.

To navigate these dimensions, the study employs a descriptive–interpretative comparative analysis, comprising three core stages: 1) A detailed description of the narrative and visual elements of *This Earth of Mankind* and Ngendon's 1946 visual pamphlet, establishing a foundational understanding of their aesthetic and historical frameworks; 2) An interpretation of symbolic and ideological meanings embedded in each work, guided by Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and John Berger's visual theory; 3) A cross-medium comparison of how both figures articulate cultural nationalism and social realism through distinct yet interrelated modes of artistic expression.

This approach allows for a context-sensitive interpretation, attentive to symbols, biographical traces, and historical embeddedness, while opening dialogic space between text and image as interpretive fields where nationalism and resistance are aesthetically articulated.

At the philosophical core of this study lies Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics, which illuminates the relationship between symbolic meaning, narrative form, and historical experience. Ricoeur outlines understanding as a twofold process: distanciation, referring to the gap between the text and the reader or between creation and interpretation; and appropriation, the re-claiming of meaning through reflective and contextual interpretation [6]. Within this framework, distance becomes a generative space for meaning to emerge through interaction between interpreter and work.

Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics enables the interpretation of *This Earth of Mankind* and Ngendon's painting as narrative constructions—texts that organize human experiences of time, identity, and history. As Ricoeur asserts, "*Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience*" [6]. Narrative, in this light, becomes the medium through which historical selfhood is both constructed and interpreted.

Ngendon's visual work is further interpreted through the lens of John Berger's Ways of Seeing, which posits that seeing precedes language, and that visual perception is shaped by knowledge, beliefs, and historical context. Berger argues that all images are socially and historically constructed; each image carries within it a "way of seeing" shaped by the artist, while the viewer's perception is determined by their own situatedness in time, space, and culture [7].

Berger acknowledges the distance between the image-maker and the viewer—echoing Ricoeur's distanciation—as the space in which original meanings are displaced and reinterpreted through time, context, and shifting perspectives. From this distance emerges the potential for appropriation: the viewer creates new meanings shaped by their own experiences. Thus, the interpretation of images or artworks is never fixed, but inherently dialogical, contextual, and open-ended. As Ricoeur suggests, we come to understand ourselves "through the detour of the text"—and, by extension, through unfamiliar images that resonate with personal and collective memory.

To enrich this interpretive method, this study adopts the metaphor of the "Distance of Closest Approach"—a concept drawn from particle physics—to describe the charged proximity between artistic expression and social reality. This "distance" is not an absolute fusion of artist and context, but a critical moment of encounter, where symbols, experiences, and the spirit of the times converge in reflective form. It marks an interpretive zone where aesthetic practice and lived experience come into closest, most generative contact.

By integrating Ricoeur's hermeneutic model with the metaphor of closest approach, this study interprets artworks not as passive mirrors of social reality, but as symbolic configurations of the zeitgeist—interpretive fields where memory, resistance, and imagination are enacted and negotiated.

This methodological synthesis allows for what this study terms interpreting from a Distance of Closest Approach—a mode of engagement that views art not as a literal document of history, but as a symbolic articulation of the historical spirit. In this perspective, *This Earth of Mankind* and Ngendon's 1946 painting are not treated as repositories of authorial intent, but as open texts that construct horizons of meaning about Indonesia, nationalism, and people's history.

This aligns with Ricoeur's principle of the "surplus of meaning"—the idea that the meaning of a text always exceeds the original intention of its creator. Interpretation, then, is not merely a recovery of past meaning, but an active engagement with history as a living resonance that informs the present.

Ultimately, this study positions literature and visual art not as ancillary domains, but as primary arenas for interpreting the zeitgeist. Interpreting from a Distance of Closest Approach means reinhabiting the symbolic terrain of historical experience— not from an external stance, but through co-presence with the artwork, in pursuit of renewed cultural consciousness.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Literature as a Field of Nationhood

Pramoedya Ananta Toer was born in 1925 in Blora, Central Java, into a modestly educated priyayi (Javanese aristocratic) family. His father was a teacher and a Sarekat Islam activist, while his mother was known for her unwavering views on dignity and self-worth. From a young age, Pramoedya was immersed in journalism and nationalist activism. He began writing early, worked as a typist during the revolution, and joined the Institute for People's Culture (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat or LEKRA), an organization that envisioned art as an instrument of popular struggle. His political affiliation, however, led to his imprisonment without trial for 14 years under the New Order regime—a period of profound isolation that paradoxically gave birth to the Buru Quartet, including *This Earth of Mankind*, establishing him as one of the most influential authors in modern Indonesian literary history [8].

Pramoedya's creative thought cannot be separated from his life experiences, particularly during the Japanese occupation. The year 1942 marked a traumatic turning point: he lost both his mother and youngest sibling in rapid succession, was forced to become the family's provider, and endured severe psychological and economic pressures. These events left an indelible mark on his memory and became the emotional substratum for early works such as Perburuan (The Fugitive) and Dia yang Menyerah (He Who Surrenders). For Pramoedya, literature was not a passive mirror of reality but a form of creative knowledge born of a dialectic between upstream reality (historical experience) and downstream truth (imaginative synthesis and inner consciousness) [9]. His works portray human beings not merely as victims of history, but as subjects who bear and interpret their suffering with dignity.

A significant shift in his political thought occurred after his 1956 visit to Beijing, where he developed a stronger commitment to social justice and national development. Deeply impressed by China's revolution—particularly its emphasis on mass mobilization and social reform—Pramoedya began distancing himself from Western liberalism and gravitated toward a more populist orientation. From that point forward, he viewed art not as an autonomous entity but as something deeply bound to the social and historical

realities of the people. He rejected the credo of art for art's sake, believing instead that literature should give voice to the lived experiences of the people and carry the potential for progressive transformation. Accordingly, his protagonists are often cast as revolutionary figures—alternative characters who challenge dominant power structures in pursuit of freedom and human dignity [10].

At the heart of Pramoedya's worldview lies the belief that history and resistance should not be rendered through ideologically rigid binaries, but interpreted through the complexities of humanity and justice [9]. With this perspective, Pramoedya constructed an alternative world in his fiction—a world not beholden to social or literary conventions, but grounded in a critical interrogation of reality. For him, literature was a vehicle for imagining different possibilities for a more just and humane society. His narratives invite readers not merely to remember the past, but to look toward the future. Even under severe repression, Pramoedya never abandoned his faith in human agency and the redemptive potential of collective hope.

In his view, social realism served as a method for interpreting national history as something concrete—grounded in the everyday experiences of the people—rather than as mythic or abstract construction. He was critical of historiographies that privileged elites or hegemonic narratives, and rejected the idealization of the "universal man" propagated by mainstream aesthetic ideologies. Instead, Pramoedya developed a bottom-up realism, one that captured suffering, inequality, and class struggle while simultaneously cultivating a sense of nationhood from below.

This Earth of Mankind is the first volume of the Buru Quartet, written during his incarceration on Buru Island, initially narrated orally to fellow prisoners beginning in 1973, and later transcribed into manuscript in 1975. Despite facing a publication ban in Indonesia, by 2005 the novel had been translated into more than 30 languages worldwide.

The novel tells the story of Minke, a young, educated native Javanese at the end of the 19th century, whose journey reflects the emergence of a sense of nationhood under Dutch colonial repression. As the son of a local regent educated at a European-style high school (Hoogere Burger School), Minke straddles two worlds: traditional Javanese aristocracy and modern European values. His personal trajectory—including his romance with Annelies and encounters with powerful figures such as Nyai Ontosoroh—unfolds as a critique of identity, social injustice, and colonial domination [11].

Beyond a personal coming-of-age story, *This Earth of Mankind* serves as a broader reflection on the socio-political dynamics of its time. It illustrates how the "free human being" must be forged in the contest between inherited traditions and universal humanist ideals. With his historical and sociological approach, Pramoedya used the

novel as a form of intellectual resistance, dismantling the myths of colonial authority and igniting an imaginative nationalism rooted in the voice of the oppressed.

In *This Earth of Mankind*, Pramoedya demonstrates that Indonesian nationalism did not arise from military or religious authority, but from the rise of modern communication—especially the Malay language and the print media, such as newspapers and books. This insight aligns with Benedict Anderson's theory of the imagined community, where the nation is constructed through print capitalism that enables dispersed populations to imagine themselves as members of the same community. For Pramoedya, literature became a strategic tool to amplify silenced histories and to construct a shared sense of nationhood—articulated, embodied, and imagined from below [10].

According to Warih Wisatsana, in the Buru Quartet, Pramoedya chronicles the history of the Indonesian archipelago during the formative phase of nationalism in the early 20th century, portraying characters like Minke and Nyai Ontosoroh as individuals caught in the paradoxes of their era. These novels are not merely personal narratives, but interpretations of the zeitgeist, where the Enlightenment ideals of Western humanism clash with the realities of colonial domination. History becomes the central character in this story, revealing the latent contradictions within Western modernity since the Aufklärung: on the one hand, promising critical universalism; on the other, perpetuating capitalist and imperialist logics. Pramoedya's critique of imperialism echoes the intellectual resistance once voiced by Victor Hugo and Mark Twain, resonating with the global rise of anticolonial thought and nationalist awakening [12].

I Nyoman Ngendon and Art as Resistance

I Nyoman Ngendon was born in 1913 (although some sources suggest 1906) in Batuan, Bali. He began his painting education under I Dewa Nyoman Mura, and later broadened his artistic horizons through his studies with Rudolf Bonnet, a Dutch painter who resided in Ubud. In the 1930s, Ngendon rose to prominence as one of the pioneering figures of the Batuan painting style, shifting from his early career as a woodcarving merchant to become a central figure in the local artistic community. He was not only a painter but also an organizer of dance performances, a cultural guide for foreign guests brought by Walter Spies, and the founder of an art shop in Batuan[13].

His involvement in *Pita Maha*—an artists' association founded in 1936 by Bonnet, Spies, and Tjokorda Gde Agung Sukawati—placed him at the heart of colonial modernist aesthetic discourse. Although he adopted secular ideas and artistic reforms from Bonnet, including the suggestion to depict everyday Balinese life outside of religious ritual, Ngendon remained deeply rooted in the symbolic and spiritual foundations of local culture. He drew significant inspiration from ancient reliefs at Puri Batuan and the Bedahulu archaeological site. His paintings are marked by strong symbolic power,

rhythmic linework, distinctive color schemes, and themes exploring Balinese mythology, religion, and cosmology[14].

Despite cultivating close relationships with foreign intellectuals—including anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson—Ngendon harbored a growing unease about colonial oppression and social inequality. As a painter born outside the palace caste, he was acutely aware of his social limitations, and by the early 1940s, had begun to express a clear anti-colonial stance[13]. His revolutionary spirit was also ignited by the painting "*Latihan Perang*" or *Military Training* (1928) by his senior peer I Dewa Ketut Kandel Ruka. Ngendon's interest in modernity and nationalism eventually led him to Yogyakarta, where he encountered revolutionary artists such as Affandi and Sudjojono, and was even said to have met President Sukarno in person. This journey to Java significantly shaped his sense of nationhood and commitment to Indonesian nationalism. He returned to Bali and began creating anti-colonial posters—at great risk of being labeled an extremist targeted by armed repression[15].

Back in Bali, Ngendon established a resistance cell in Batuan and organized local youths to resist the Dutch reoccupation through NICA. He joined the I Gusti Ngurah Rai Regiment and served in its information division, producing revolutionary pamphlets and posters. His paintings during this period no longer catered to collectors or pure aesthetics; they functioned instead as instruments of agitation meant to inspire the people. He distributed his posters himself across villages, using art as a means of political communication and morale-building[14].

However, his militant commitment sparked tension within the local art scene. Some fellow painters grew uneasy with Ngendon's total engagement in armed resistance. When Batuan's resistance movement was eventually crushed by pro-Dutch militias from Gianyar, Ngendon and approximately 10–15 villagers were captured and brutally executed at the village cemetery in 1948(though other sources mention 1947)[13][14]. Historian and anthropologist Hildred Geertz, as cited by Green, noted that Ngendon possessed a deep sensitivity to modernity but refrained from explicitly expressing it in his paintings—except when driven by deliberate political intent. He operated within the stylistic constraints of Batuan's traditional painting. Within these constraints, however, Ngendon infused his works with themes of struggle, populism, and spirituality—creating a *counter-narrative* within the boundaries of convention[16].

It is important to note the discrepancies in naming and chronology within various sources. Some refer to him as I Ketut Ngendon, others as I Nyoman Ngendon. There are also variations regarding the timeline of his key activities: some trace his early engagement with modern painting to the early 1930s, while his involvement in armed resistance is noted from 1945 until his execution in 1948. This transitional period—from

painter to guerrilla fighter—calls for further archaeological and historiographic investigation to avoid reducing the complexity of his roles and life experiences.

Despite these differing details, Ngendon stands as a figure who transcended the canvas: he was not only a painter but also a fighter. In many respects, he parallels Pramoedya Ananta Toer, both of whom emerged from the margins of society, engaged with modernity, and used creativity as a tool to construct narratives of a more just and humanistic vision of the nation. As a tribute to I Nyoman Ngendon's legacy as both pioneering painter and freedom fighter, Perkumpulan Pelukis Baturulangun, the painters association of Batuan, held an exhibition titled *A Tribute to I Nyoman Ngendon* at the ARMA Museum, Ubud, from 3–22 September 2024.

Social Realism and Cultural Nationalism in the Works of Pram and Ngendon

Social realism in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *This Earth of Mankind* and I Nyoman Ngendon's revolutionary paintings, functioning as visual pamphlets, is not merely a method of depicting social realities, but rather an aesthetic and ideological strategy to pierce through the colonial condition and awaken a sense of nationhood. Both works present human experiences entangled in complex historical processes—resistance against domination, the search for identity, and efforts to imagine a nation from the perspective of the common people.

Through the character of Minke, Pramoedya articulates the inequalities, inner turmoil, and clashing values of the Dutch East Indies. He does not offer history from the lens of colonial elites, but from the eyes of a native student, uprooted from his cultural roots yet striving to reconstruct his awareness as part of a nascent nation. Minke is not a hero in the conventional sense, but a fragile and conflicted figure, burning with the desire to understand and transcend his time. The tension between his European education and the discriminatory reality he faces produces a psychological complexity that reflects the collective identity crisis of the colonized.

The social realism in *This Earth of Mankind* is not merely a representational technique, but a narrative framework that allows readers to inhabit the structural inequalities of colonial rule through Minke's perspective. He is portrayed as a pioneer of the nationalist movement. His experience as a native receiving European education—while confronting a colonial system that provides no true emancipation—sharpens his nationalist consciousness and intensifies his solidarity with the indigenous people. The conflict between modern knowledge and native identity, between love and power, becomes a starting point for a deep-rooted sense of nationhood born through existential and intellectual appropriation.

Through Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic lens, *This Earth of Mankind* can be read as a text that constructs a world of possibilities—a narrative space in which readers understand history and identity through the detour of textual interpretation. Minke's narrative activates a process of distanciation from the normalized colonial structure while simultaneously prompting the appropriation of new meanings of nationhood and independence within the reader's consciousness. In this context, Pramoedya creates an imagined community through the printed word, not merely describing reality but inviting readers to reinterpret history from subaltern positions and everyday life[5][6].

In contrast, Ngendon's revolutionary visual pamphlets present the struggle not through verbal narrative, but through a stirring visual language. In his 1946 painting, a young man bearing a spear stands proudly amid blazing flames. In the foreground, a woman is shown in a devotional gesture of prayer. Around them rise the forms of meru towers and temples—symbols of Bali's spiritual and cultural identity. The entire composition is engulfed in fire, not just literal but also metaphorical: the Balinese resistance burns with passion, sacrifice, and revolutionary fervor.

At the top of the painting, a poignant line is inscribed in Balinese script: "*Trusang masiat cening, mémé ngastitiang*" which can be translated as "Keep fighting, my child, mother prays for and blesses you." This line sublimates the connection between armed resistance and cultural-spiritual blessing. The mother is not depicted as restraining her son from violence, but as one who grants sacred approval for heroic deeds imbued with dignity. In Balinese cultural logic, *pangastiti* (maternal prayer) is more than a blessing—it is an affirmation of noble values: that struggle is not for personal ambition but for *dharma*.

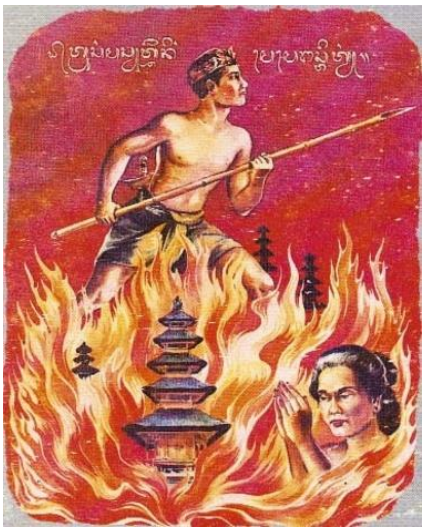

Figure 1. Ngendon's revolutionary visual pamphlets. Source: @sugi.lanus (instagram)

This revolutionary visual pamphlet is not merely an illustration of an event but an articulation of socio-political realism that frames Balinese resistance within the

national revolution. The subject depicted appears in the post-Puputan Margarana (1946) era, a time when Bali was in upheaval defending independence. The painting served not only as visual documentation but also as political propaganda, conveying the message of struggle through local idioms. It was later used as the cover for *Bali Berjuang*, a book by Nyoman S. Pendit.

The social realism expressed by both Pramoedya and Ngendon does not end with the portrayal of external reality but also deconstructs the structures of power embedded in daily life. They do not simply "present" reality, but actively interrogate it, inviting readers and viewers alike to reexamine and reinterpret their social conditions.

Beyond social realism and the spirit of the times, a shared thread between Pramoedya and Ngendon is their conscious choice to create from the subaltern position—on the margins of power—using accessible and resonant media. Pramoedya wrote in popular Malay, placing native characters at the center of his narrative and bridging national consciousness through concrete experience and printed communication. Ngendon, with his Batuan-inspired lines and symbols, designed visual pamphlets that not only ignited the emotion of resistance but also communicated the struggle through a pictorial language rooted in local culture. These strategies show that they were not only reflecting the zeitgeist, but also actively constructing a grassroots narrative of nationhood. History is not solely written by the state—it is also expressed through art and literature sourced from the voices of the people. In this framework, their works serve as forms of cultural resistance, challenging dominant narratives and offering space for articulating identities grounded in collective experience, expanding the meaning of cultural nationalism as a grounded and committed expression.

A crucial aspect of both artists' work lies in how they articulate cultural nationalism. Nationalism in their works is not propaganda or imposed ideology, but a consciousness that emerges from below—from daily life and from personal experiences that become part of the nation's collective memory. In *This Earth of Mankind*, nationalism arises from Minke's existential and intellectual unease toward a system that oppresses and degrades his people. It is rooted in lived experience and in the circulation of ideas that gradually shape a deep and lasting sense of nationhood.

Likewise, Ngendon's paintings manifest cultural nationalism through images of youthful fighters and sacred Balinese symbols. He did not mimic Western visual idioms to express revolutionary fervor, but instead modified the traditional Balinese visual language to convey messages of resistance and hope. He portrayed ordinary people as agents of history—not aristocrats or elites. His paintings thus became visual acts to reclaim historical narratives from the dominance of the state and colonial power.

In *This Earth of Mankind*, newspapers and the act of reading play a pivotal role in spreading national consciousness. As a writer and reader, Minke is entangled in

discourses that shape the imagination of "Indonesia"—a shared space that did not yet exist politically but was beginning to take form in the minds of its protagonists.

Ngendon's revolutionary visual pamphlets served a similar function: as painted visual media spreading the spirit of nationalism in an immediate and accessible manner. Their symbolic and dynamic compositions evoke emotion and foster imagined solidarity among those who viewed them. In this sense, Ngendon's paintings become cultural artifacts that extend the reach of imagined communities—from the village to the nation.

These works differ temporally—created during the colonial and early postcolonial periods—and across mediums: word and image. Yet in these differences, we discover a shared interpretive experience. Understanding history, struggle, and nationalism is not only a matter of factual knowledge or archival records, but also a resonance with the emotional and symbolic layers offered by art.

Both *This Earth of Mankind* and Ngendon's paintings are not static documents, but open texts that continue to live through interaction with their audience. The meaning of these works does not reside solely in the author's or painter's intentions, but is always a space of interpretation. Pramoedya and Ngendon do not simply voice the past—they connect us to the *zeitgeist* they once inhabited.

Conclusion

Pramoedya Ananta Toer and I Nyoman Ngendon manifest nationalism not as a product of the state, but as a living cultural process rooted in the experiences of the people. Both created their works not from the center of power, but from the margins—from the isolated prison of Buru Island and from a modest home in Batuan. Across different time periods and mediums—literature and painting—they voiced the zeitgeist through social realism grounded in historical realities and the inner tensions of a colonized society. This study brings them into a shared interpretive framework not because of biographical parallels, but because of the power of their works to narrate nationhood as a lived and collective experience.

In *This Earth of Mankind*, the spirit of the times is embodied in a narrative that explores identity conflict, social inequality, and the search for national meaning through the characters of Minke and Nyai Ontosoroh. Meanwhile, in Ngendon's revolutionary visual pamphlets, the zeitgeist flows through assertive lines, blazing colors, and local symbols transformed into political statements. These works are not mere documentation, but articulations—a world being fought for, interpreted, and reimagined by ordinary people.

Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics offers a frame to understand how narratives and symbols in these works cross time and context. Through the concepts of distanciation and appropriation, today's readers and interpreters are able to bridge the temporal gap

between creation and reception. Here, the relevance of the concept Distance of Closest Approach becomes vital: it marks an epistemological position that approaches the work not merely as an object, but as a living, reflective field of experience.

The social realism found in Pramoedya and Ngendon's works does not stand as a style or genre alone, but as an attitude—a stance that aligns with the people's experience and offers critique of colonial domination. Pramoedya crafted narratives from below, giving voice to the silenced. Ngendon, through his canvas, expressed resistance from within the body of tradition that remains connected to the realities of struggle. In this context, cultural nationalism becomes an alternative narrative that grows out of colonial wounds, the courage to reclaim meaning, and the drive toward social solidarity.

Their contribution to the formation of imagined communities (Anderson) becomes evident through their respective mediums. Pramoedya builds spaces of solidarity through the printed word that stirs consciousness, while Ngendon articulates this visually—direct, intuitive, and affective. John Berger's view of representation as ideological construction reinforces the notion that their works are ways of seeing and imagining the nation.

To read nationalism from the "Distance of Closest Approach" means to read both texts and images as living interpretive fields. Pramoedya and Ngendon emerge as storytellers and painters of nationhood—recording, interpreting, and reformulating Indonesian identity from within everyday spaces often marginalized. In their voices and visual forms, nationalism is not a slogan but a grounded awareness—emerging from the people, from experience, from shared hope and pain.

This study thus expands the horizon of Indonesian cultural nationalism studies. Nationalism is no longer confined to the state's formal narratives but also grows within the aesthetic domain and artistic expressions that give voice to the marginalized, reflect local tensions, and embody emancipatory spirit. This cross-medium approach affirms the necessity of reading nationalism in more inclusive, participatory, and culturally sensitive terms—attuned to diverse forms and lived experiences.

Finally, the study advocates for an integration of hermeneutic methods and cross-disciplinary approaches—particularly between visual and textual literacy—in arts and cultural education. Reading from the Distance of Closest Approach not only offers an intensive and contextual reading strategy, but also serves as an ethical-pedagogical proposition to preserve memory, renew historical awareness, and build a more reflective and grounded cultural future.

In this way, the study affirms that Indonesian nationalism and the spirit of nationhood can be read as a living artistic expression—interpreted through deep hermeneutics and

bridged by the "Distance of Closest Approach" between artwork, history, and the collective consciousness of the Indonesian people.

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