

## Architecture and Interior Design as a Reflection of Identity and Social Class: A Case Study of Nyai Ontosoroh's House in Bumi Manusia

Putu Ari Darmastuti<sup>1</sup>, Ni Kadek Yuni Diantari<sup>2</sup>, I Putu Udiyana Wasista<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup> Institut Seni Indonesia Bali

### ABSTRACT

Architecture and interior design not only represent aesthetic and functional aspects, but also act as tools for constructing identity, power, and social class. This study analyzes Nyai Ontosoroh's house in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *Bumi Manusia* as a representation of social class ambiguity and spatial symbolism in the colonial context of the Dutch East Indies. Through an interdisciplinary approach between literary studies, architecture, and postcolonial theory, this paper explores how the physical form of the house, the division of space, and interior elements become a means of resistance against colonial and patriarchal social structures. Nyai's Indisch-style house, complete with a garden, a carpeted attic, a spacious living room, and a luxurious bathroom, not only reflects high social status, but also becomes an arena for negotiating gender and racial identities. The results of the analysis show that the domestic space in this novel is a "narrative architecture" that contains political and cultural meanings, and reflects a complex and ambivalent colonial reality. This study contributes to the discourse on decolonizing architecture and the importance of reading space as a social text.

### KEYWORDS

Colonial Architecture,  
Social Identity,  
Domestic Space



©2025 The Author(s).  
Published by UPT.  
Penerbitan LP2MPP  
Institut Seni Indonesia  
Denpasar. This is an  
open-access article  
under the [CC-BY-NC-SA](#)  
license.

## Ananta Toer Explains Social Class Differences Through Residential Buildings

Architecture and interior design are not only a reflection of aesthetics or function but also a tool to form and reflect cultural identity, power, and social class. The issue of spatial inequality in colonial areas is a concern in the study of architecture and design. The legacy of colonial architecture in the colonized areas is a witness to how power and oppression exist, but at the same time, it becomes a place of resistance and also a redefinition of identity. [1], [2].

Colonial architecture in the Dutch East Indies reflects a hierarchical social system: the European class is at the top, followed by the Foreign Orientals (Chinese, Arabs), and

finally the Natives. Colonial houses usually combine European architectural elements with adaptations to the tropical climate, creating an Indisch style with high roofs, wide verandas, and large openings. Social strata in architecture emerge through several things, such as the layout of private and public spaces, building materials and interiors, access to sanitation, lighting, and prioritizing comfort. [3].

The lack of interdisciplinary approaches between literary and architectural studies in reading colonial space narratives. Lack of in-depth studies of colonial house interiors as a tool of social resistance, especially from the perspective of gender and local culture. Some colonial architectural literature only discusses building styles and technologies, not the use of space by marginalized figures. [4] [5].

The importance of exploring and reconstructing architectural narratives from local and gender perspectives, to balance the history dominated by colonial perspectives. This study can enrich discussions on the decolonization of architecture and interior design, especially in the context of education and preservation of cultural heritage. It can be a reflection material for today's designers in understanding how domestic spaces can reflect and challenge social structures. [6], [7].

Examines how the architecture and interior of Nyai Ontosoroh's house in Bumi Manusia reflect social class identity. Reveals the role of the house as an ambivalent space, namely a status symbol and a tool of resistance against gender and racial discrimination. Contributes to the study of postcolonial architecture through a literary approach and spatial analysis. [8], [9].

## History of Colonial Architecture

Colonial house architecture is a symbolic representation of social and political hegemony manifested through the grand scale of the building, the application of classical European architectural elements such as Doric and Ionic columns, and the organization of space that shows control over the domestic environment and local labor. Public spaces such as living rooms and dining rooms are designed in large dimensions to support the social activities of the colonial elite, such as entertaining official guests and showing social status. In addition to being a representation of power, colonial architecture also reflects the process of cultural acculturation, where European building styles blend with local construction techniques and materials. In interior design, the influence of local and Asian cultures is evident in the use of batik motifs, traditional furniture, and distinctive ornaments.

This phenomenon is increasingly complex in the homes of Peranakan people, which showcase the integration of Chinese cultural elements, such as ancestral altars, alongside Dutch-style furniture. This indicates the construction of a hybrid and not entirely monolithic spatial identity. Although designed by Dutch architects, these

houses show adaptation to the tropical climate: cross ventilation, the use of verandas, and the use of local materials such as bricks, Javanese roof tiles, and teak wood. This adaptation shows how colonial architecture cannot be separated from the local geographical and cultural context.

The Indies style is a hybrid architectural style that emerged from the meeting between European architecture (especially Dutch) and adaptation to the tropical climate and local Javanese culture. The characteristics of this style include: 1) High roofs, cross ventilation, and high ceilings to deal with tropical heat and humidity; 2) Large verandas (*voorgalerij*) as transitional spaces between the outside and inside; 3) Large openings, double-leaf windows, and solid wooden doors; 4) Floor plans that regulate the separation between private and public spaces, as well as between spaces for Europeans and native servants; 5) High roofs, cross ventilation, and high ceilings to deal with tropical heat and humidity; 6) Large verandas (*voorgalerij*) as transitional spaces between the outside and inside; 7) Large openings, double-leaf windows, and solid wooden doors; 8) Floor plans that regulate the separation between private and public spaces, as well as between spaces for Europeans and native servants.

According to Nas, the Indies style developed as “a result of a compromise between Western values and Eastern life practices.”[10] . *Peranakan* House is a house style that is often built by people of Chinese descent in big cities such as Semarang, Surabaya, and Jakarta. This house displays the influence of Dutch colonial architecture, Chinese architecture, and local elements. Its characteristics are: Fasad simetris dengan elemen neo-classic: 1) Central open space (*tianjing*) as an air circulation regulator; 2) Use of bright colors, ceramic ornaments, and typical Chinese decorative motifs. Peranakan houses are evidence of the existence of “cultural hybridity” in a colonial context that was not entirely dominated by European power, but was also colored by the adaptation of local communities and immigrants. [11].

### Nyai Ontosoroh's House

Colonial houses during the Dutch East Indies era reflected a hierarchical and segregative social system, where physical space was used to define boundaries between social class, race, and gender. However, in the case of Nyai Ontosoroh's house, the structure experiences a distortion of meaning because the occupants come from "non-formal" circles but control the house and the family economy.

The description of the architecture and interior design of Nyai Ontosoroh's house in Wonokromo is seen from several discussions quoted from the character dialogues in the book *Bumi Manusia*.

*“Karper mulai memasuki daerah Wonokromo. ‘Lihat ke kiri,’ Rob menyanari. Sebuah rumah bergaya Tiongkok berpelataran luas dan terpelihara rapi dengan pagar hidup... Kemudian*

*menyusul rumah loteng dari kayu, juga berpelataran luas. Dekat di belakang pagar kayu terpasang papan nama besar dengan tulisan: Boerderij Buitenzorg. ... Dari kejauhan sudah nampak atap sirapnya dari kayu kelabu. Pintu dan jendela terbuka lebar... Sebagai gantinya, sebuah konsol cukup luas dan lebar melindungi anak tangga kayu yang lebar pula, lebih lebar daripada pintu depan.”*

**Translate:**

Karper began to enter the Wonokromo area. ‘Look to the left,’ Rob suggested. A Chinese-style house with a large, well-maintained yard and a hedge... Then followed a wooden attic house, also with a large yard. Close behind the wooden fence was a large sign with the words: Boerderij Buitenzorg. ... From a distance, the roof of the shingles was already visible, made of gray wood. The doors and windows were wide open... In its place, a fairly wide and broad console protected the wide wooden steps, wider than the front door.”

This quote shows how Nyai Ontosoroh’s house is not only a symbol of social status, but also a space full of meanings of power and identity. In this narrative, the house is metaphorically described as a “wooden palace,” a term that describes luxury and power, but is owned by a native concubine—a fact that shook the colonial social norms at that time.

The mention of the name Boerderij Buitenzorg on the front board shows that this house is not only domestic, but also includes production and economic areas, signifying that Nyai Ontosoroh carries out managerial and public roles that are usually dominated by colonial men.

The presence of Darsam as a guard shows that this space is also physically protected, becoming a symbol of autonomy and control over the domestic area owned by a local woman, who is usually at the bottom of the colonial hierarchy.

In addition, the presence of the nameplate “Boerderij Buitenzorg” makes it clear that this domestic space is dual, as a home and economic center (plantation and livestock), and is managed not by a Dutchman, but by Nyai herself. Architecturally, the gate and the nameplate become markers of territory and autonomy, and change the perception of space from merely private to a symbol of status and social structure. The presence of Darsam and his “troops” gives the impression that the house is organized like a fortress or territory, adding a militaristic dimension to the guarding of domestic space. This reinforces the idea that the house is not passive, but rather protected and sovereign socially and symbolically.

*“Sampai sejauh itu orang hanya mengenal nama Tuan Mellema... Sebaliknya orang lebih banyak menyebut-nyebut gundiknya: Nyai Ontosoroh... Kata orang, keamanan keluarga dan perusahaan dijaga oleh seorang pendekar Madura, Darsam, dan pasukannya. Maka tak ada orang berani datang iseng ke istana kayu itu. Aku terhenyak. Dokar tiba-tiba membelok, melewati pintu gerbang, melewati papan nama Boerderij Buitenzorg, langsung menuju ke tangga depan rumah. Aku bergidik.”*

**Translate :**

“So far, people only know the name of Tuan Mellema... On the other hand, people often mention his concubine: Nyai Ontosoroh... People say that the security of the family and company is guarded by a Madurese warrior, Darsam, and his troops. So no one dares to come to the wooden palace casually. I was shocked. The horse-drawn carriage suddenly turned, passed the gate, passed the Boerderij Buitenzorg sign, and headed straight for the front steps of the house. I shuddered.”

This quote narratively depicts Nyai Ontosoroh’s house not just as a dwelling, but as an “architecture of power”—a space that projects authority, control, and social identity that deviates from colonial norms. The phrase “wooden palace” is not simply a metaphor for luxury, but implies an unusual shift in social position: the large and prestigious house does not belong to a European master, but is instead ruled by a native concubine. This challenges the colonial logic, in which ownership and grand architecture are synonymous with the white ruling class.

“...Entering the bathroom is enjoying yet another luxury. The walls are covered with 3mm mirrors... Standing on a crème earthenware tile base... The bluish water in the porcelain-lined tub... And wherever the eye is directed, it is oneself who is also visible: front, back, side, all over.”

**Translate :**

*“...Memasuki kamarmandi adalah menikmati kemewahan lain lagi. Dinding-dinding dilapis dengan cermin 3 mm... Berdiri di atas landasan tegel tembikar crème... Air yang kebiruan di dalam bak berlapis porselen... Dan barang ke mana mata diarahkan, diri sendiri juga yang nampak: depan, belakang, samping, seluruhnya.”*

This description not only depicts architectural luxury but also serves as a visual symbol of class consciousness and self-image. The mirrors that cover the entire wall create the impression of a space that is abundant and elite, while also showing how the space allows Nyai to create and control her identity in front of the public and herself. In the colonial context, such space was rarely enjoyed by non-official native women, so her presence strengthens Nyai’s position as a figure who transcends conventional boundaries of gender and class. “...Before us lay a beautiful garden, not large, almost tiny, with a pond and a few white swans playing around... A stone bench stood at the edge of the pond. ‘Come,’ Annelies led me out, along a concrete path flanked by green azure.”

**Translate :**

“...Di hadapan kami terbentang taman yang indah, tidak luas, hampir-hampir dapat dikatakan kecil-mungil, dengan kolam dan beberapa angsa putih bercengkrama... Sebuah bangku batu berdiri di tepi kolam. ‘Mari,’ Annelies membawa aku keluar, melalui jalan beton dalam apitan gazon hijau.”

The description of the small garden with a pond and white swans is a direct representation of the classic European garden model, which is usually found in elite

villas. Despite its “tiny” size, the presence of elements such as stone benches, ornamental ponds, and swans indicates a deliberate aesthetic effort—an imitation of the colonial bourgeois lifestyle that is synonymous with relaxation, order, and refinement.

The concrete path flanked by lawn grass shows the use of modern materials and landscape techniques rooted in the West, rather than local tropical garden traditions such as Javanese gardens or typical Indonesian open courtyards. This is a visual signal that the outdoor space of this house has been integrated into the discourse of colonial architecture, making the garden a symbol of bourgeois culture internalized in the domestic space of the natives.

However, this garden is also an intimate and personal place, as reflected by Annelies' role in bringing Minke there. This shows how colonial space—although shaped by dominant values—can also be a space for emotional interaction, especially for figures who are in ambivalent social positions, such as Annelies and Minke.

In quote 106, the condition of the attic in Nyai Ontosoroh's house is described as very luxurious. The luxury is because the floor in the attic is covered with a carpet.”

#### Translate :

“Pada kutipan 106 digambarkan kondisi loteng di rumah Nyai Ontosoroh dengan kondisi yang sangat mewah. Kemewahan itu karena lantai pada loteng tersebut dilapisi oleh permadani.”

On the other hand, the attic of this house is also a symbolic space: a place for private conversations between Nyai, Minke, and Annelies—a space where processes of reflection, identity negotiation, and the formation of personal relationships occur. In this case, the attic becomes more than just a physical space; it is a “narrative space” that supports Nyai's resistance to gender and colonial constraints.

## Class Ambiguity and Social Symbolism

The *Earth of Humans* book, in general, tells a story about the social relationship between local people and Dutch people in the Dutch East Indies during the late 19th century, when colonialism was prevalent. The main character of this book, Minke, is a Javanese aristocrat who has the opportunity to study at the Hoogere Burger School (HBS). He has friends from Dutch which opens the chance to have a relationship with other Dutch people in Java. One day, Minke visits Nyai Ontosoroh's house at Wonokromo and is surprised by the house situation, which is not a common occurrence in other local houses. Nyai Ontosoroh is a local woman who is the mistress of a Dutch businessman and has two children, named Annelis Mellema and Robbert Mellema. She managed Herman Mellema's agricultural business, *Boerderij Buitenzorg*, in Wonokromo, after Herman Mellema had retired from the industry. She takes charge of accounting, operations, employee management, and product distribution. How Nyai Ontosoroh

managed the factory surprised Minke because it was impossible for a local woman to speak Dutch fluently and work like a man in that era. Minke not only gets surprised by the situations but is also amazed by the house's look.

Nyai Ontosoroh's house in the novel *Bumi Manusia* presents a strong social paradox: on the one hand she is a concubine, a status that is legally and culturally marginalized; but on the other hand, she becomes the owner of a large colonial-style house complete with luxurious facilities, company management, and social control over her household environment. This ambiguity shows the tension between formal status and social reality, and how domestic space becomes an arena for negotiating identity and power.

In colonial architecture, a house is not just a dwelling, but a manifestation of class and power structures. Colonial houses were designed to emphasize the dominance of the colonizing nation over the colonized nation, in the form of building scale, access boundaries between spaces, and European aesthetics imported into tropical lands [12].

However, in the context of Nyai Ontosoroh's house, these symbols of power are used by someone who does not come from the dominant colonial class, thus creating social dissonance. She lives in an Indisch-style house, complete with a mirrored bathroom and a gazebo garden, but her status as a native and non-official woman makes her a "liminal" figure, located between the center and the periphery. This phenomenon reflects the concept of "colonial ambivalence" put forward by Homi K. Bhabha, where colonial spaces often become sites that not only reflect power but also places where that power is questioned and transformed. [13]. Nyai Ontosoroh's house is an ambivalent space: it represents high status through its architectural form and interior contents, but it is also a site of resistance against gender and racial discrimination, as seen in Nyai's complete control over her finances, business, and even her child's education.

Social symbolism is also manifested in the arrangement of space: the existence of public spaces such as the grand living room used to entertain European guests shows involvement in the discourse of power. However, this space also becomes a place for social negotiations—whether with doctors, notaries, or government officials—which shows Nyai's efforts to redefine her position amidst the oppressive colonial system.

Thus, houses in a colonial context, especially the house belonging to Nyai Ontosoroh, cannot only be read as architectural artifacts, but also as social texts—a spatial narrative about inequality, resistance, and the redefinition of class and identity.

## Conclusion

The house in the novel *Bumi Manusia* not only functions as a setting, but also becomes a strong narrative symbol in reflecting the dynamics of identity, social class, and power relations during the colonial era. A study of Nyai Ontosoroh's house reveals that colonial architecture and interior are not neutral, but rather represent a complex social structure, full of ambiguity and full of symbolism.

As the concubine of a European, Nyai Ontosoroh occupies a legally marginal social position, but can build an upper-middle-class image through the physical form of her house. The luxury of the bathroom, European-style garden, spacious living room, and interior layered with cultural symbols (such as imported rugs and furniture) display the visibility of power and empowerment. Thus, the domestic space in her house not only reflects status but also becomes an instrument of identity negotiation and a tool of resistance to colonial and patriarchal domination.

The colonial house, which is generally a symbol of Western domination, in Nyai Ontosoroh's case becomes an ambivalent place, accommodating and challenging power at the same time. This is where class ambiguity arises: Nyai is not part of the colonial class, but the house and its functions make her part of the powerful local elite. The spatial arrangement, use of materials, and management of the house's functions show that domestic space is an active medium for forming social identity. This study emphasizes that architecture and interior are not merely the result of aesthetic or technical design, but also shape and represent social and political order. In the context of *Bumi Manusia*, Nyai Ontosoroh's house is a "narrative architecture" that speaks about colonialism, gender, class, and resistance in a subtle but profound way.

## References

- [1] H. Lefebvre, D. Nicholson-Smith, H. Lefebvre, and H. Lefebvre, *The production of space*, Reprinted. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.
- [2] E. W. Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- [3] P. Nas, Ed., *The past in the present: architecture in Indonesia; [this publication coincided with the exhibition "Moderniteit in de tropen", held at the Netherlands Architecture Institute from 19 January to 3 June 2007]*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2007.
- [4] G. Bachelard, M. Jolas, and J. R. Stilgoe, *The poetics of space: the classic look at how we experience intimate places*, Nachdr. Boston: Beacon Press, 2009.
- [5] J. Rendell, *Art and architecture: a place between*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2006.
- [6] A. Escobar, *Designs for the pluriverse: radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. In *New ecologies for the twenty-first century*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

- [7] K. H. Anthony, *Designing for Diversity: Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Architectural Profession*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
- [8] P. A. Toer, *Bumi manusia*, Cet. 9. in Sebuah novel sejarah. Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 2002.
- [9] C. Nelson, Ed., *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, Nachdr. Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2007.
- [10] T. Whitten, Ed., *Wildlife*, Reprint. in Indonesian Heritage. Singapore: Archipelago Press, 2003.
- [11] L. Suryadinata, *Peranakan Chinese politics in Java: 1917 - 1942*, Rev. ed. Singapore: Singapore Univ. Pr, 1981.
- [12] T. Whitten, Ed., *Wildlife*, Reprint. in Indonesian Heritage. Singapore: Archipelago Press, 2003.
- [13] H. K. Bhabha, *The location of culture*. London ; New York: Routledge, 1994.