

Songs of Resistance: Subaltern Voices and Digital Solidarity from Pramoedya Ananta Toer to Band Sukatani

Yedija Remalya Sidjabat

Institut Seni Indonesia Bali

ABSTRACT

This paper explores subaltern representation and digital solidarity, connecting literary resistance in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's works with contemporary digital expressions, exemplified by Band Sukatani's protest song. It addresses how Pramoedya's narratives of subaltern struggles resonate in modern digital contexts. Utilizing textual analysis of selected Pramoedya novels, content analysis of Sukatani's lyrics, and online discourse analysis, this study applies theories from subaltern studies, nationalism and identity, and digital affect to examine persistent issues of censorship, institutional oppression, and mobilization of digital solidarity. Findings demonstrate continuity in forms of resistance from literary to musical and digital platforms, highlighting the enduring relevance of Pramoedya's works and contemporary activism through digital media. The study concludes that subaltern resistance remains dynamic and robust, reinforced by digital cultural expressions that sustain and amplify the legacy of Pramoedya Ananta Toer.

KEYWORDS

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Band Sukatani, subaltern resistance, digital affect, censorship, solidarity



©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.

Introduction: Subaltern Resistance from Page to Platform

Pramoedya Ananta Toer stands as one of the most influential literary figures in Indonesian history, renowned not only for his artistic brilliance but also for his relentless advocacy of marginalized voices. His literary legacy is deeply intertwined with the political struggles and social injustices that plagued Indonesia during and after colonial rule. Central to Pramoedya's narratives is the concept of subalternity—wherein historically marginalized individuals and groups confront institutional systems designed to silence their voices. In his iconic *Buru Quartet*, beginning with the novel *This Earth of Mankind*, the character Nyai Ontosoroh exemplifies this struggle, a subaltern figure navigating colonial legal structures that systematically invalidate her agency and voice [1], [2].

In contemporary Indonesia, the subaltern condition articulated by Pramoedya continues to manifest vividly, albeit in new forms and through different media [3]. A recent

instance illustrating this ongoing struggle is the case of Band Sukatani, whose viral protest song, “*Bayar Bayar Bayar*”, powerfully critiques institutional corruption, particularly within the police force. This digital protest, rapidly disseminated via social media platforms, underscores how digital culture offers subaltern voices novel avenues for articulation, visibility, and resistance. However, just as with Pramoedya’s literary resistance, Band Sukatani’s digital activism swiftly faced institutional suppression, demonstrating the persistent nature of censorship and repression in Indonesian society today.

To understand the continuity between these distinct yet interconnected historical moments, this paper employs Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s seminal theorization of the subaltern. Spivak argues that subaltern voices are systematically excluded from dominant discourses, making authentic speech near-impossible within hegemonic frameworks [4]. This framework enables us to critically examine the experiences of Nyai Ontosoroh and Band Sukatani as emblematic figures whose voices are persistently marginalized or delegitimized by institutions that monopolize authority and discourse.

Furthermore, Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities helps clarify how national identities and solidarities can form and reform through shared media practices, be they literary or digital [5]. Anderson highlights that media technologies fundamentally shape the contours of national and communal identities. In the transition from print to digital, we observe a transformation in how subaltern resistance is collectively imagined and mobilized.

Complementing Anderson’s perspective, Sara Ahmed’s theory on affect provides insight into the emotional dimension of subaltern resistance, particularly in the digital age. Ahmed explains how collective emotions such as anger, empathy, or solidarity can bind individuals into politically active communities [6]. The affective responses elicited by Band Sukatani’s suppression, for instance, became an essential catalyst in mobilizing widespread digital solidarity, significantly impacting public discourse and institutional responses.

Lastly, Ariel Heryanto’s scholarship on Indonesian popular culture and censorship is essential for understanding the contemporary dynamics between media, cultural production, and state power. Heryanto emphasizes that digital media can amplify subaltern voices, enabling widespread public critique against institutional censorship. Yet, he also cautions against overly optimistic views, noting how state power adapts to control and censor digital dissent subtly yet effectively [3].

By drawing upon these theoretical frameworks, this paper critically examines how subaltern resistance adapts and persists from the colonial era depicted by Pramoedya to contemporary digital activism exemplified by Band Sukatani. Through analyzing literary and digital expressions, this research reveals both the enduring structures of

institutional violence and the transformative potentials offered by digital platforms in amplifying marginalized voices.

Thus, this study seeks not merely to document historical and contemporary forms of subaltern resistance but also to illuminate the structural continuities and discontinuities within which these resistances occur. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the persistent struggle for voice and recognition within Indonesian society, arguing for the continuing relevance of Pramoedya's legacy in analyzing and confronting contemporary social injustices.

From Nyai Ontosoroh to Sukatani: Subaltern Speech and Institutional Violence

The question of who has the right to speak, and whose speech is recognized or silenced, remains a central issue within cultural and political discourse, especially regarding subaltern or marginalized groups. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, raises significant concerns about the structural mechanisms that systematically silence marginalized voices [4]. This theoretical exploration is vividly embodied in the narratives and experiences of characters and groups historically and contemporarily positioned at society's periphery.

A prominent literary example of this dynamic is Nyai Ontosoroh, a key figure in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's acclaimed novel *This Earth of Mankind* (*Bumi Manusia*). Nyai Ontosoroh represents the quintessential subaltern figure: a native Indonesian woman oppressed by colonial power structures. Despite possessing remarkable intellect, moral clarity, and agency, Nyai's voice is consistently negated by colonial legal systems, which refuse to acknowledge her legitimacy as a subject. Her struggle to assert her voice and dignity exposes a fundamental injustice embedded in colonial law and society [1]. According to Foulcher, Nyai's character vividly captures how colonial structures systematically undermine subaltern agency by denying marginalized groups the right to speak on equal terms [2].

In contemporary Indonesian contexts, such structural dynamics persist, although in different forms and via different mediums. A striking recent example is Band Sukatani, a grassroots musical group from Sukatani village, Purwakarta, West Java, which gained rapid national attention in February 2025. Band Sukatani produced a song entitled "*Bayar Bayar Bayar*", directly criticizing the pervasive issue of bribery and corruption among local police officers. The song quickly became viral on social media platforms, resonating strongly with public frustrations and grievances regarding institutional corruption.

However, this unexpected popularity triggered swift institutional retaliation. By early February 2025, police authorities intervened, summoning band members for

questioning and pressuring them to publicly apologize through online media. Band members were subsequently forced to remove their viral content from social platforms, demonstrating a modern manifestation of institutional violence and censorship in contemporary Indonesia. Thus, the institutional reaction to Band Sukatani vividly exemplifies persistent attempts to silence critical voices within contemporary digital contexts [7].

Examining Nyai Ontosoroh and Band Sukatani side-by-side reveals striking similarities despite their distinct historical settings and modes of communication. Both examples demonstrate how subaltern voices—whether literary or musical—challenge prevailing power structures. Importantly, both Nyai Ontosoroh’s narrative and Band Sukatani’s digital protest were perceived as threatening precisely because they disrupted accepted norms of authority and discourse. Thus, their acts of speech were swiftly delegitimized through institutional mechanisms intended to restore the established social order.

Michel Foucault’s theoretical perspective on institutional power and violence provides an insightful lens for analyzing these cases. Foucault argues that institutional violence extends beyond physical coercion, deeply embedded within disciplinary practices, laws, and administrative procedures that control social behavior and speech [7]. In Nyai Ontosoroh’s case, colonial laws explicitly marginalized indigenous women, stripping away their agency and legal legitimacy. In the case of Band Sukatani, institutional violence took the form of bureaucratic intimidation and symbolic punishment—such as compelled public apologies—designed to discredit and silence critical voices without overt physical force.

Moreover, the transition from literary representation to digital communication has introduced new complexities to institutional censorship. Ariel Heryanto highlights this transition, noting that while digital media can amplify marginalized voices, they simultaneously invite subtler forms of institutional control, such as digital surveillance, enforced apologies, and symbolic shaming [3]. Band Sukatani’s experience exemplifies precisely this nuanced form of contemporary censorship, where authorities publicly frame subaltern critiques as socially disruptive, thereby delegitimizing their speech and curbing their influence.

However, digital platforms also enable rapid collective responses, fostering immediate public solidarity against such institutional attempts at silencing. Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined communities” elucidates how digital platforms facilitate the rapid formation of communities around shared experiences and emotions [5]. During Band Sukatani’s institutional suppression in February-March 2025, thousands of Indonesians quickly expressed solidarity through social media hashtags such as #KamiBersamaSukatani, disseminating the song and associated narratives widely. These

digital acts effectively countered institutional censorship, creating alternative channels of public discourse.

Additionally, the affective dimension of digital resistance significantly amplifies subaltern voices. Sara Ahmed's affect theory emphasizes how collective emotions like empathy, anger, and solidarity form politically potent communities [6]. The public's empathetic and supportive reaction to Band Sukatani illustrates Ahmed's theory, where shared emotional experiences in digital spaces become transformative political forces capable of contesting dominant institutional narratives.

Nonetheless, while digital solidarity can effectively challenge immediate acts of censorship, questions remain regarding its long-term sustainability. Heryanto cautions against overly optimistic interpretations of digital activism, noting that institutional powers swiftly adapt to digital strategies through subtler yet equally potent forms of repression [3]. Thus, although digital platforms provided Band Sukatani temporary protection and amplification, their long-term effectiveness in sustaining meaningful political change remains uncertain.

By analyzing Nyai Ontosoroh's historical literary struggles alongside Band Sukatani's recent digital experience, this comparative study reveals fundamental continuities in institutional violence against subaltern speech. Both cases demonstrate how institutions systematically undermine marginalized voices, regardless of medium or historical context. Moreover, the analysis emphasizes the importance of critically examining contemporary modes of digital resistance, acknowledging both their transformative potential and inherent limitations.

In conclusion, examining Nyai Ontosoroh and Band Sukatani provides valuable insights into how subaltern voices continue to negotiate complex spaces between institutional repression and digital amplification. Their struggles underscore the persistent challenge faced by marginalized groups attempting to speak truth to power. This comparative perspective also reaffirms the enduring relevance of Spivak's theory, emphasizing the ongoing necessity of interrogating and resisting institutional frameworks that silence marginalized perspectives.

Digital Affect and Collective Empathy

In contemporary digital environments, resistance increasingly relies on affective dimensions—emotions that traverse digital platforms and galvanize collective empathy. Sara Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, emphasizes that affect is inherently social and political, arguing that emotions not only reside within individual experiences but also circulate publicly, binding communities through shared feelings [6]. Ahmed's framework provides a critical lens for analyzing how digital affect mobilizes collective empathy in contemporary acts of subaltern resistance.

The phenomenon surrounding Band Sukatani during February and March 2025 exemplifies digital affect's role in fostering collective resistance. When their protest song "*Bayar Bayar Bayar*" became viral, it was not merely the song's lyrical critique of corruption that resonated with audiences but also the emotive dimensions of frustration, anger, humor, and solidarity conveyed through digital media. These emotional responses rapidly spread via social media platforms, prompting widespread public identification with the band's underlying message of frustration against systemic corruption and institutional repression.

According to Ahmed, emotions are powerful precisely because they are contagious—they spread through and bind communities, mobilizing collective identities and actions [6]. In Band Sukatani's case, this contagious affect transformed personal grievances into collective political consciousness, with digital communities quickly coalescing around supportive hashtags like #KamiBersamaSukatani. Online discourse surrounding the band was characterized by intense emotional engagement—anger toward institutional repression, empathy towards the band members, and shared frustration at endemic corruption practices within state institutions.

The concept of "digital affect" thus elucidates how emotions—particularly empathy—are mediated through digital platforms, amplifying subaltern voices otherwise suppressed by traditional institutional channels. Ahmed's theory underscores that collective empathy emerges when emotions align individuals around common social and political grievances, enabling the rapid formation of affective communities capable of resisting dominant institutional narratives. Band Sukatani's experience clearly demonstrates this alignment, as digital affective responses rapidly transformed isolated individual grievances into collective acts of digital protest [6], [8].

Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities" provides additional insight into how digital affect fosters collective identity formation. Anderson originally theorized imagined communities in the context of nationalism, describing communities that are socially constructed through shared symbols, experiences, and emotions [5]. In contemporary digital contexts, Anderson's theory remains highly applicable, particularly in how online communities rapidly form around shared emotional reactions to real-time events. The digital solidarity expressed towards Band Sukatani illustrates precisely this process, with online users quickly identifying as members of an affective community, bound by shared emotional responses towards perceived injustices.

Digital affect's role in generating collective empathy highlights critical differences between traditional and contemporary modes of resistance. Historically, as illustrated by Nyai Ontosoroh's literary narrative in *This Earth of Mankind*, emotional identification with subaltern struggles was mediated primarily through literature, requiring slow and reflective engagement. In contrast, digital affective responses occur in real-time,

spreading instantly and widely through platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. This immediacy facilitates rapid collective empathy and public mobilization, significantly challenging institutional attempts at suppression.

Furthermore, digital affective resistance is susceptible to appropriation by populist or commercial agendas. Online platforms, driven by algorithmic dynamics and commercial interests, may commodify emotional responses, reducing genuine political engagement to fleeting entertainment or performative gestures. This commodification potentially undermines the authenticity and effectiveness of digital empathy, raising questions about its capacity to effect substantive change beyond temporary digital solidarity [3].

Despite these critiques, it remains undeniable that digital affect possesses significant political potential, particularly in creating immediate challenges to institutional narratives and censorship practices. In Band Sukatani's case, rapid digital solidarity effectively counteracted initial institutional suppression efforts, demonstrating how digital affect disrupts established power relations and amplifies subaltern voices in contemporary contexts. Moreover, the affective dimension of digital resistance fosters empathy across diverse social groups, creating cross-cutting solidarities beyond conventional boundaries of class, geography, or identity. This cross-sectional empathy significantly broadens the scope of potential subaltern alliances, amplifying the voices traditionally excluded from hegemonic discourse [8].

Additionally, digital affective solidarity serves as an essential mechanism for countering institutional stigmatization. When Band Sukatani faced forced apologies and public humiliation, digital communities quickly reframed institutional narratives, portraying the band as victims rather than perpetrators. By mobilizing collective empathy and reframing emotional responses, digital affect effectively resisted institutional attempts to delegitimize the band's speech and actions.

Examining the phenomenon of digital affect and collective empathy through the theoretical frameworks of Ahmed, Anderson, and Heryanto reveals both the potential and limitations of contemporary digital resistance. While digital affect successfully mobilizes immediate solidarity, facilitates rapid collective empathy, and challenges institutional censorship, its sustainability and political efficacy require critical evaluation. Nonetheless, Band Sukatani's recent experience underscores the transformative power of digital affect, demonstrating its capacity to amplify subaltern voices, disrupt institutional narratives, and foster meaningful collective resistance against structural oppression. By critically examining digital affect within contemporary resistance contexts, scholars and activists alike can better understand its potential as a tool for lasting social and political change.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the continuity and transformation of subaltern resistance from Pramoedya Ananta Toer's literary depictions to contemporary digital expressions, exemplified by Band Sukatani's recent viral protest. By systematically comparing the struggles articulated through Nyai Ontosoroh's character in *This Earth of Mankind* and the real-world digital resistance of Band Sukatani, this paper highlights significant structural continuities in institutional mechanisms of censorship and violence directed towards marginalized voices.

Both Nyai Ontosoroh's literary narrative and Band Sukatani's digital activism underscore how institutional power structures persistently strive to delegitimize and silence subaltern voices. Spivak's concept of subaltern speech provides a valuable analytical framework, emphasizing the inherent difficulty marginalized groups face in achieving recognition within dominant hegemonic discourses. Nyai Ontosoroh, despite her intellectual clarity and moral strength, remains fundamentally voiceless within the colonial legal system that structurally denies her recognition. Similarly, Band Sukatani, despite achieving rapid digital amplification, faced contemporary institutional efforts at suppression—manifested through enforced apologies, public shaming, and digital censorship. Both cases reveal how institutions strategically define the parameters of legitimate speech, systematically marginalizing those voices perceived as disruptive to established social orders.

This paper has also demonstrated the critical role digital platforms and affective responses play in contemporary subaltern resistance. Drawing from Ahmed's affect theory, Anderson's concept of imagined communities, and Heryanto's analysis of digital activism, the research highlights how digital affect enables rapid mobilization of collective empathy and political solidarity. The viral public response supporting Band Sukatani illustrates how collective emotions, mediated through digital platforms, significantly challenge institutional narratives. Emotions such as empathy, anger, and frustration, circulating widely online, have effectively redefined the legitimacy of subaltern grievances, demonstrating digital media's potential to contest institutional censorship.

However, this paper critically acknowledges limitations inherent in digital resistance. As noted by Heryanto, digital activism can be ephemeral, quickly overshadowed by shifting public attention and institutional counter-measures. Thus, while Band Sukatani's digital solidarity successfully disrupted initial censorship efforts, its long-term impact and sustainability remain uncertain. Future research must critically evaluate how digital activism can transition from immediate emotional mobilization into enduring political and institutional reforms.

By juxtaposing historical literary resistance with contemporary digital activism, this paper underscores enduring structural tensions between subaltern voices and institutional power. Both Nyai Ontosoroh and Band Sukatani exemplify marginalized voices actively challenging dominant narratives yet facing systemic attempts at silencing. Nonetheless, the rapidity and scope of digital resistance mark a crucial contemporary shift, suggesting digital affect's potential for transformative political action despite inherent vulnerabilities.

Ultimately, this comparative analysis reaffirms the continuing relevance of Pramoedya's legacy within contemporary Indonesian resistance movements. The continuity of subaltern struggles, from literary pages to digital platforms, highlights ongoing structural violence while simultaneously emphasizing innovative subaltern responses through digital media. Recognizing these dynamics is crucial for understanding how marginalized voices continuously negotiate complex spaces between institutional repression and digital amplification.

Therefore, this research contributes significantly to broader scholarly discussions on subalternity, institutional censorship, and digital activism, providing critical insights into contemporary Indonesian society's political and cultural dynamics. It further underscores the necessity for continuous scholarly attention toward evolving forms of subaltern resistance, emphasizing the critical importance of digital platforms in contemporary political struggles.

References

- [1] P. A. Toer, *This Earth of Mankind*, 2nd ed. in Buru Quartet Ser, no. v. 1. East Rutherford: Penguin Publishing Group, 1996.
- [2] K. Foulcher, "'Bumi Manusia' and 'Anak Semua Bangsa': Pramoedya Ananta Toer Enters the 1980s," *Indonesia*, vol. 32, p. 1, Oct. 1981, doi: 10.2307/3350853.
- [3] A. Heryanto, Ed., *Popular culture in Indonesia: fluid identities in post-authoritarian politics*. in Routledge media, culture, and social change in Asia, no. 15. London ; New York: Routledge, 2008.
- [4] G. C. Spivak and Edition Diskord (Germany), "Can the Subaltern Speak?," *Philos.*, vol. 14, no. 27, pp. 42-58, 2003, doi: 10.5840/philosophin200314275.
- [5] B. R. O. Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London New York: Verso, 2006.
- [6] S. Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion*, Second edition. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.
- [7] M. Foucault and M. Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.
- [8] N. A. G. Matias, P. H. D. Bartolome, S. L. R. Carreon, F. M. L. Tallara, and J. A. Villarama, "Meme-ingful Actions: Uncovering the Influence of Political Memes on Leadership Performance and Values Formation," *Lang. Technol. Soc. Media*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 204-219, Nov. 2024, doi: 10.70211/ltsm.v2i2.141.