

## The Representation of Nyai Ontosoroh's Character in "Bumi Manusia" within Contemporary Ethnic Fashion Design

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### ABSTRACT

This study represents literary characters in contemporary ethnic fashion design, emphasizing the character of Nyai Ontosoroh from Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *Bumi Manusia*. Nyai Ontosoroh was chosen to represent a strong, intelligent indigenous woman who resists colonialism and patriarchy. The purpose of this research is to interpret Nyai's character values into visual clothing forms through a descriptive qualitative approach with textual narrative analysis. Values such as assertiveness, independence, and courage are translated into clothing design silhouettes, the selection of *sekar jagad* batik motifs, and symbolic color combinations. The influence of 19th-century European fashion is implemented through the distinctive silhouette of the *kebaya* kutubaru, reflecting Nyai's character as a traditional woman with progressive ideas. This research also applies the principles of narrative fashion, which uses clothing as a medium for conveying stories and cultural values. This paper reveals that clothing design can serve as an effective visual medium for expressing literary narratives and cultural identity. The representation of Nyai Ontosoroh's character through design not only produces aesthetic works but also expands reflective, contextual design practices rooted in local values. This research contributes to the development of an interdisciplinary approach between fashion, literature, and cultural studies in Indonesia's creative sector.

### KEYWORDS

Representasi, Nyai Ontosoroh, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Busana Etnik Kontemporer



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## Ananta Tour Literacy - Bumi Manusia as a Medium for Cultural Expression and Design

This study represents literary characters in contemporary ethnic fashion design, emphasizing the character of Nyai Ontosoroh from Pramoedya. The development of globalization and commodification in the fashion world has created a need for clothing designs that are not only aesthetic but also rich in philosophical values and strong cultural identity. [1]. One approach that is increasingly popular in the modern fashion world is narrative-based design, in which clothing is realized as more than just a visual object, but as a means of expressing ideas, history, and philosophical values. Literature, as one of the cultural identities and narrative heritage of the Indonesian

people, can be used as a rich source of ideas, especially when exploring significant and complex female figures [2]. One of the most iconic female characters in Indonesian literature is Nyai Ontosoroh, the central character in the novel *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth of Mankind) written by Pramoedya Ananta Toer.

The indigenous female character depicted in the novel, known as “Nyai,” is a woman who becomes the concubine of a Dutch man. After becoming a concubine, Nyai Ontosoroh develops into a strong, intelligent, and independent woman. She reflects a woman who transcends social status and colonial law thanks to her intelligence and courage in facing injustice. This character not only depicts the historical conditions of women in the colonial era but also represents resistance against the patriarchal system and colonial domination, which remains relevant to study even today.

The potential of indigenous female figures such as Nyai Ontosoroh has not been widely responded to visually in the context of fashion design. Until now, the understanding of Indonesian literature has often been limited to literary criticism or adaptations in film and theater. However, in the realm of fashion, literary characters can be revived through symbolic changes into clothing, which opens up a new space as a medium for cultural expression and introduction to the diversity of Indonesian literature. This study addresses this gap by interpreting the character of Nyai Ontosoroh into contemporary ethnic fashion designs that not only depict cultural values but also reinforce the narrative of indigenous women in the colonial era through the visual form of clothing. This is further emphasized by the emergence of fashion activism and cultural narratives in the global fashion industry, where clothing serves as a medium to express the identity and history of marginalized groups.

The character of Nyai Ontosoroh is influential in this context because she demonstrates a narrative of resistance against the colonial system through intelligence, resilience, and economic mastery [3]. The selection of Nyai as a source of design inspiration aims to present a new perspective in understanding the revolution of Indonesian women in the colonial era, which was influenced by local culture. The character of Nyai Ontosoroh as a visual and conceptual source in fashion design is interpreted through a narrative analysis approach. The representation is done by exploring the symbols found in the novel's plot, such as social structure, power relations, and identity, which are expressed in fashion elements such as silhouettes, motifs, colors, and textures. Thus, the resulting design work not only has aesthetic value but is also a narrative work that reveals cultural identity and social criticism.

This paper attempts to retranslate the narrative values of the indigenous female character Nyai Ontosoroh into contemporary ethnic fashion design, while contributing to the interdisciplinary dialogue between literature, design, and cultural studies. Practically speaking, the results of this paper are expected to enrich the conceptual approach in the creative process of Indonesian designers, as well as encourage more reflective design exploration rooted in local literature.

## Research Methods

This study applies a descriptive qualitative approach using narrative analysis methods to the literary text *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth of Mankind) written by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. This method was chosen because the purpose of the study is to explore and interpret the characters in greater depth, as well as to examine the potential narrative values in the text that can be represented in visual form in the form of contemporary ethnic fashion designs. The data analyzed in the novel *Bumi dan Manusia* includes narrative quotations, characterization, social and cultural background, and symbols present in the storyline, particularly those related to the character Nyai Ontosoroh. This character portrays an indigenous woman who experiences oppression but is able to rise as an emancipatory figure. The data collection process was conducted using document analysis techniques, which involved reading, noting, and interpreting relevant text sections related to the character in fashion design [4].

## The Narrative Value of the Indigenous Female Character “Nyai Ontosoroh”

Nyai Ontosoroh is an important character in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel *Bumi Manusia*, representing the struggle against gender inequality and colonial oppression in Indonesia [3]. Her character embodies resilience and empowerment, as Nyai Ontosoroh faces social obstacles imposed by gender and colonial rule. Nyai Ontosoroh's journey illustrates her transformation from a marginalized figure to a symbol of resistance, representing the significant role of women in Indonesia's national struggle during the colonial era [5].

The character of Nyai Ontosoroh in *Bumi Manusia* represents profound narrative values such as emancipation, resilience, intellectuality, and leadership. Nyai Ontosoroh is portrayed as an indigenous woman and concubine who faces significant marginalization and discrimination, yet she emerges as a symbol of resistance, challenging the authority of her husband and the colonial government to assert her rights over her children and business [5].

The character of Nyai Ontosoroh also illustrates a profound feminist narrative, showcasing her evolution from oppression to empowerment as she learns to navigate social norms and assert her agency in a male-dominated environment [6]. Nyai Ontosoroh's ability to leverage her social, cultural, and economic capital highlights the complexity of her role in the national struggle for independence, emphasizing the often overlooked contributions of women in Indonesian history [7]. Throughout her journey, she not only fought for her rights but also represented a broader call for gender equality and social justice for indigenous women.

## Representation of Nyai Ontosoroh Character

The representation of fictional characters in design is not merely a tribute to literature, but also a cultural activity that revives the values embodied in the characters within a visual space. In the field of design, particularly fashion, the portrayal of characters such as Nyai Ontosoroh serves as an approach to enrich ideas by drawing on the cultural values embedded in a garment design. According to Stuart Hall, representation is how culture operates; it does not merely reflect reality but also shapes and conveys meaning [1]. Therefore, the process of bringing Nyai Ontosoroh's character values to life in the design is not only focused on visual beauty, but also serves as a medium for “reinterpreting” the complex history of Indonesian women, which has been neglected by a dominant system.

The representation of the literary character Nyai Ontosoroh plays a role in strengthening the culture-based creative industry. This approach is in line with the national vision to develop a creative economy based on local wealth, as outlined in Indonesia's creative economy roadmap [8]. By representing characters in local stories, designers contribute to cultural preservation efforts that are flexible, innovative, and relevant to the younger generation. In addition, this practice also strengthens the position of fashion as an element of the cultural ecosystem and visual literacy, rather than just a product for mass consumption.

With the presence of figures such as Nyai Ontosoroh in the modern fashion world, Indonesian designers have the opportunity to showcase the power of storytelling and local cultural values on the international stage. This is in line with the concept of glocalization, introducing local identities in a way that is acceptable on the global stage [9]. The presentation of Nyai in fashion is not only about visual beauty but also a cultural diplomacy strategy to reveal that Indonesia has a complex history and literary heritage that deserves to be appreciated by the world.

## The Actualization of Nyai Ontosoroh's Character in Contemporary Ethnic Fashion

Ethnic fashion refers to fashion that highlights the richness of local culture, whether in terms of patterns, methods, or symbolic meaning [10]. Contemporary fashion presents modern, simple, and creative designs. When these two aspects are combined, a form of cultural expression emerges that is appropriate, reflective, and relevant to current conditions. Modern ethnic fashion allows cultural traditions to be preserved in a flexible form. According to Tulloch, the fusion of traditional aesthetics and modern innovation is part of “cultural storytelling” in the world of fashion, enriching the narrative of clothing [11].



**Figure 1.** Design Development of Nyai Ontosoroh Representation in Contemporary Ethnic Design  
(Source: Diantari, 2025)

The character of Nyai Ontosoroh has two contrasting aspects, namely a strong Javanese culture and a spirit of reform influenced by European education. This is very relevant to be displayed in the context of contemporary ethnic design. As Hall points out, cultural representation is not only about the reproduction of symbols, but also a process of creating new meanings based on various social positions [1]. The combination of Nyai Ontosoroh's conflicting sides is reinterpreted through the silhouette of the *kutubaru kebaya*, a garment synonymous with Javanese women's wear, which is combined with modern European clothing elements such as tailored collars and batik sarong skirts, reflecting Nyai's struggle between local values and the colonial system she faced.

The influential and educated character of Nyai Ontosoroh is reflected in her bold fashion choices, such as structured collars, sharp shoulders, and geometric cuts that symbolize control and intellectuality. In contrast, her warmth and emotional side are shown through feminine elements such as long skirts inspired by sarongs. Design principles such as proportion and balance are applied to blend these hard and soft elements into a single appearance. As explained by Tracy and Robles, narrative design allows visual forms to tell a deep story without the need for words [2].

The *sekar jagad* batik motif is used to represent Javanese culture. *Sekar jagad* batik is batik that is composed of a combination of various classic and contemporary batik motifs. The name *sekar jagad* batik comes from the word *sekar*, which means flower, and *jagad*, which means world. Another meaning of *sekar jagad* comes from the Dutch word *kar*, which means map, while *jagad* in Javanese means world. [12]. This shows that Batik *Sekar Jagat* represents the beauty and diversity of flowers around the world.

In its composition, the variety of motifs are separated by wavy lines that form a field. This wavy field is shaped like a map containing the natural beauty of various parts of the world, making this batik different from other types of batik. This batik is used for skirts adapted from sarongs commonly worn with *kebaya* and European-style dresses in the 19th century.



**Figure 2.** Representation Nyai Ontosoroh in Contemporary Ethnic Design  
(Source: Diantari, 2025)

The use of colors such as black for assertiveness, maroon for inner strength, and gold for self-respect creates a powerful visual language. According to Juliana, visual symbols in clothing have the ability to convey collective meaning and identity values [13]. Semi-transparent materials such as silk and organza add a dimension of ambiguity and characteristic layers to Nyai's character—soft on the outside but strong on the inside. Several details on the top, which adapts the *kebaya* and blazer, are decorated with lace, brocade, and embroidery as a visualization of 19th-century European fashion.

## Conclusion

This study shows that the character of Nyai Ontosoroh in the novel *Bumi Manusia* is a symbol of a strong indigenous woman who is able to deal with colonial power, patriarchy, and social issues with intelligence, courage, and independence. Through textual analysis, these character values can be visually represented in the form of contemporary ethnic fashion designs that not only possess aesthetic beauty but also serve as a medium to convey the spirit of struggle against gender inequality and colonial oppression in Indonesia. The actualization of Nyai Ontosoroh's character in contemporary ethnic fashion is achieved by adapting traditional indigenous women's



attire, such as the *kebaya*, and 19th-century European clothing. This process allows designers to expand their culturally-based creative practices while fostering dialogue between literature, history, and the contemporary fashion industry. This research contributes to emphasizing the importance of an interdisciplinary approach in design, as fashion is not merely a functional product but can also serve as a reflective and communicative medium in responding to local literature.

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