

Feudal Echoes: Unveiling Gendered Power Through Indonesian Literary Narratives *The Girl from the Coast* By Pramoedya Ananta Toer

Ni Putu Tisna Andayani^{1*}, Ida Bagus Candrayana²

^{1,2}Institut Seni Indonesia Bali

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes *Gadis Pantai* (*The Girl from the Coast*) by Pramoedya Ananta Toer through a socialist feminist approach to uncover the forms of gender oppression embedded in the feudal social structure of early 20th-century in Java. Feudalism in *The Girl from the Coast* is portrayed as a system that freezes class and gender identity. It erases a woman's name, agency, and dignity in order to preserve the elite's status quo. **Bendoro positions the Girl from the Coast as a symbol of status rather than an equal partner.** *The Girl from the Coast* serves as a vivid example of female resistance, even within constraints. Male dominance in the novel constructs a narrative that suppresses women's agency. The story illustrates how the institution of marriage can become a form of symbolic violence. Pramoedya gives voice to women who have long been silenced by social systems. *The Girl from the Coast* stands as a witness to how tradition can perpetuate subordination. Pramoedya not only critiques this feudal system, but also lays the foundation for reinterpreting the role of women within modern social structures. The protagonist, a young woman from a fishing community, is coerced into marriage with a Javanese aristocrat as a "trial wife," reflecting the interwoven realities of patriarchy and class hierarchy. This study reveals that symbolic and social forms of violence depicted in the novel not only reinforce female subordination but also carve out space for symbolic resistance through the character's emergence of self-awareness. By synthesizing feminist theory from Simone de Beauvoir and the patriarchy-class framework of Rosemarie Tong and Kate Millett, this article proposes that *Gadis Pantai* stands as an emancipatory narrative, remaining highly relevant for understanding gendered power relations in contemporary society.

KEYWORDS

Javanese feudalism¹,
Social Inequality²,
Female
Subordination³



©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.

A Century of Resistance: Pramoedya Ananta Toer and the Enduring Voice of *Gadis Pantai*

2025 marks the centennial celebration of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Indonesia's most renowned and controversial literary figure. His works have shaped the nation's cultural consciousness, challenged dominant narratives, and amplified the voices silenced by history. Among his expansive body of work, *Gadis Pantai* (*The Girl from the Coast*) stands out as a radical yet subdued novel in capturing the intersection of gender, class, and colonial tension. Although often overshadowed by his more epic works such as the "Buru Quartet," this intimate story unveils the persistence of feudal oppression and the quiet resistance of the marginalized [1].

By linking “Feudalism and the Female Body” to the Bali Bhuwana Waskita V 2025 seminar, themed *Pram-Bhuwana-Prana (Paradigm-World-Pramoedya)*, conducted at the Indonesian Arts Institute of Bali (ISI Bali) not only celebrates a century of a literary icon’s birth, but also promotes the re-reading of power in particularly the feudal patriarchy that continues to shape and seep into contemporary realities. On this occasion marking 100 years of Pramoedya’s work, *Gadis Pantai* is once again brought to light as a literary piece that provides vital space for mainstreaming women’s voices in Indonesia’s social history. The novel, which recounts a woman’s silent struggle against a feudal system, is now elevated within an international academic forum as a significant reflection for post-feudalism studies in Southeast Asia.

Through the psychologically profound and spiritually resilient character of *Gadis Pantai*, Pramoedya not only addresses gender issues, but also opens transnational conversations on colonial legacies and enduring social inequalities in the region. This commemoration is not merely a tribute to a great oeuvre, it revitalizes critical discourse on women, power, and agency amid the ongoing swirl of history. Bendoro positions the Girl from the Coast as a symbol of status rather than an equal partner. *The Girl from the Coast* serves as a vivid example of female resistance, even within constraints. Male dominance in the novel constructs a narrative that suppresses women’s agency. The story illustrates how the institution of marriage can become a form of symbolic violence. Pramoedya gives voice to women who have long been silenced by social systems. The Girl from the Coast stands as a witness to how tradition can perpetuate subordination.

By synthesizing Simone de Beauvoir’s [2] theory of woman as “The Other” within existential thought and the concept of patriarchy from Rosemarie Tong and Kate Millett, *Gadis Pantai* delivers an emancipatory narrative that remains sharply relevant to understanding contemporary gender power relations. De Beauvoir emphasizes that women’s freedom is continually “imprisoned” by social constructs that render them subordinate, while Tong and Millett extend this critique by tying patriarchy to class dynamics—highlighting how economic structures and social hierarchies reinforce male domination.

Within the shadow of *Gadis Pantai*’s alienation from her body and identity through the feudal institution of marriage, Pramoedya portrays an inner resistance that rejects dominant narratives and proposes the potential for transformation of gender oppression. In this way, *Gadis Pantai* not only critiques the legacy of Javanese feudalism—it also serves as a conceptual roadmap for exploring and dismantling modern patriarchal chains, guiding us toward a vision of transformative emancipation in a global era.

Javanese Feudalism in *Gadis Pantai*

At its core, *Gadis Pantai* is a critique of patriarchal feudalism. The unnamed protagonist, referred to simply as “the girl,” is robbed of her identity the moment she enters the aristocrat’s household. Her marriage, devoid of affection or autonomy,

underscores the transactional nature of gendered power under feudal custom. She is an ornament, valued only for her youth and obedience. Pramoedya's narrative foregrounds her internal transformation not as a grand act of rebellion, but as quiet resilience. When she is ultimately discarded by the aristocrat after bearing him a child, she does not break finally she returns to her village and reclaims her life. This subtle act of defiance illustrates the strength of women who endure and resist in ways history rarely celebrates.

Javanese feudalism stands as one of the sharpest critiques in Pramoedya's works, especially in the novels *The Girl from the Coast* and *The Reversal Tide* [3]. He portrays how caste systems and social hierarchies bind individuals, particularly women and the common people. In *The Girl from the Coast*, the main character is forced to marry a nobleman, only to be abandoned after giving birth. Pramoedya highlights how feudal culture perpetuates power through symbols, tradition, and symbolic violence. It serves as the structural backdrop shaping power relations in the novel *The Girl from the Coast*.

Pramoedya illustrates how caste systems and social hierarchies uphold the domination of the *priyayi* class over commoners. The character *Bendoro*, representing the elite, exploits his status to take the Girl from the Coast as a trial wife without rights or social recognition. Feudalism is portrayed as both a colonial and local legacy. The *priyayi* play a key role in maintaining the status quo. Women are rendered as mere objects within the feudal system. A symbolic marriage, marked by the gifting of a *Keris* (traditional dagger), serves as a mechanism to erase female agency. Simone de Beauvoir argued that women are made into "the other," denied autonomous existence. In the context of Javanese feudalism, the Girl from the Coast becomes the 'liyan' an outsider deprived of rights over her own body and future.

Social Inequality and Class Disparity in *Gadis Pantai* also highlights the class divide between the *priyayi* (nobility) and ordinary people. The Girl from the Coast comes from a fishing family, without access to education or power. Upon entering Bendoro's household, she not only loses her identity but also the right to determine her own fate. Social stratification in Javanese society; education as a tool of exclusion and control; class representation in Pramoedya's narrative; economic and symbolic inequality. Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics*, emphasizes that patriarchy is not merely biological, but also political and economic. The Girl from the Coast experiences subordination due to her class and gender, making her a victim of a system that fuses feudalism with patriarchy.

Social Inequality and Class Disparity in *The Girl from the Coast*

Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novel explores the entrenched class divide between the *priyayi* (Javanese aristocrats) and the lower-class commoners. The protagonist, a young girl from a modest fishing family, enters the world of the elite not as an equal, but as a dispensable object within a rigidly hierarchical society. Her transition into Bendoro's

household marks not just the erasure of her personal identity either she's not only loses her identity but the forfeiture of agency over her own fate. The girl's brief experience of luxury is not liberation but an alienation. Her return to her coastal village signals a rejection of a social order that cannot reconcile dignity with privilege. Through this, *Gadis Pantai* offers a nuanced reflection on the cost of assimilation and the meaning of identity in a society built on exclusion.

The novel reflects the stark stratification within traditional Javanese society, where lineage and social status determine one's worth. The *priyayi* class maintains dominance through cultural norms, symbolic authority, and inherited privilege. Education as a tool of exclusion and control is an access controlled and functions as a gatekeeping mechanism [4]. The protagonist's lack of formal education reinforces her marginal status, while the educated elite wield learning as both a symbol of superiority and a tool of control. The novel also delves into the rigid class structures that defined colonial Java. The aristocrat's disdain for villagers reflects the Dutch-influenced elitism entrenched within native society. Pramoedya complicates this dynamic by showing that oppression often comes not just from colonizers, but from indigenous elites complicit in colonial systems [5].

The class representation in Pramoedya's narrative through a deeply empathetic lens, Pramoedya portrays class conflict not just as a structural problem, but as a deeply personal experience. His nuanced narrative reveals the psychological toll of systemic injustice. Economic and symbolic inequality is clearly shown on material poverty which is compounded by symbolic violence, the denial of dignity, voice, and selfhood. Even as the protagonist enters an affluent space, she remains economically dependent and socially powerless. He explicitly writes: (1) *Ah, Mardinah, this Girl from the Coast can read and write—but sadly, all she flaunts are loan letters, not morals;* (2) *Smart women like her are troublesome, always writing, yet it has nothing to do with politics or trade;* (3) *Look at her reading old Javanese manuscripts, as if those letters could replace cooking and child-rearing;* (4) *The aristocracy may be proud of having educated women, but if they're too clever, they're labeled as not knowing their place;* (5) *Mardinah says literacy is the key to progress; we're just waiting for her to harvest rice, not words.* Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics*, emphasizes that patriarchy is not merely biological, but also political and economic. The Girl from the Coast experiences subordination due to her class and gender, making her a victim of a system that merges feudalism and patriarchy.

In the context of *The Girl from the Coast*, this phenomenon is strikingly evident and permeates many layers of the characters' lives. The theme reflects not only Pramoedya's personal experiences, but also serves as a mirror of Indonesia's social and historical dynamics. Several lines in the novel clearly illustrate this condition, for example: (1) Mbok (the protagonist's servant) says: *"Women were put on this earth, Mas Nganten, maybe indeed to be beaten by men."* This demonstrates how violence against women is normalized—even justified—by women themselves; (2) The Girl from the Coast herself, though experiencing oppression, remains submissive and does not dare to defy her father or husband. She says: *"A servant is but a servant."* This line

reflects how she sees herself as someone's possession, not as an individual with rights and a voice.

She did not know what lay before her. All she knew was that she had lost her entire world. In fear, she asked: why was she not allowed to live where she wished, among those she loved, on the land with salty beaches and crashing waves? This question reflects Simone de Beauvoir's concept of *Otherness*, wherein patriarchy strips women of their right to inhabit space and shape identity. De Beauvoir argues that women, cast as 'the Other,' are often shackled by norms that rob them of existential freedom. From bell hooks' perspective, the call for *home* becomes a site of accumulated symbolic violence: the denial of women's *homeplace* perpetuates their subordination. Mariasari's story asserts that true emancipation demands a reclamation of space and voice for women.

The novel *The Girl from the Coast* continues to hold strong relevance to the current social and political conditions in Indonesia. In a discussion held in Bandung, Ashilah stated, "Patriarchal culture still persists to this day." She also highlighted the character Mardinah in the novel. Mardinah is an aristocrat and is literate, she gained her privilege in that era because she was able to attend school. At the time, schooling was reserved only for wealthy women. The following statements reveal that in *The Girl from the Coast*, Pramoedya not only exposes the dark treatment of the poor by the aristocracy of the time, but also makes readers aware of patriarchal practices enacted by women themselves—those who belittle other women based on class differences: the *priyayi* (nobility) versus the *rakyat jelata* (commoners). In today's reality, Ashilah (2021) compares the character of Mardinah to contemporary feminist figures who advocate feminism while believing themselves to be more enlightened than other women. Without realizing it, they too may perpetuate patriarchal practices by belittling those who have yet to understand feminist ideas.

The internalization of patriarchal values hinders the development of critical awareness among women, making it difficult for them to recognize that they are being oppressed. This process indirectly strengthens the patriarchal system, as women themselves participate in perpetuating the very norms that suppress them. In the end, it produces unequal social relationships, rendering lower-class women more vulnerable to exploitation and violence. This phenomenon still occurs in various societies, especially in environments that uphold tradition and conservative gender norms. The internalization of patriarchy makes the struggle for gender equality even more complex, as the challenges come not only from external sources (men or systemic structures) but also from within women themselves. The higher the Gender Inequality Index (GII) value, the greater the gender disparity that occurs. Below is an estimate of patriarchal internalization dominance across islands, based on the number of provinces whose Gender Inequality Index (GII) exceeded the national average (0.459) in 2022.

Below is an estimate of the dominance of patriarchal internalization on each island, based on the number of provinces with a GI above the national average [6]:

Island	Number of Province	Province with GII $\geq$ 0,459	Percentage of Provinces with 'Dominant Patriarchy'
Sumatra	10	Jambi (0,540)	1/10 = 10 %
Jawa	6	—	0/6 = 0 %
Kalimantan	5	—	0/5 = 0 %
Sulawesi	6	—	0/6 = 0 %
Bali & Nusa Tenggara	3	Nusa Tenggara Barat (0,648)	1/3 = 33 %
Maluku & Papua	4	Maluku (0,527), Maluku Utara (0,534), Papua Barat (0,537)	3/4 = 75 %

Patriarchy and Female Subordination

Patriarchy in *The Girl from the Coast* is present not only within domestic relationships but also in the broader social structure. The Girl from the Coast has no right to refuse the marriage, cannot keep her child, and is not recognized as a legitimate wife. She becomes a symbol of women controlled by a patriarchal system. Pramoedya Ananta Toer, in *The Girl from the Coast*, portrays the female body not merely as a poetic object, but as a battleground of feudal and patriarchal power struggles. Women perceive their subordinate position as “destiny” or “fate.” They justify unfair treatment from men, and even repeat it toward other women. Patriarchal values are accepted as social norms rather than forms of oppression. Internalized patriarchy is the process in which women consciously or unconsciously absorb and accept patriarchal values as part of their identity and behavior.

The Female Body as a Site of Power in the Novel *The Girl from the Coast*, Mariasari as the protagonist, often referred to as “The Girl from the Coast” or “servant” she undergoes processes of naming, disciplining, and negotiating identity. She is compelled to surrender her body to traditional marriage institutions, surveilled within domestic routines, and eventually carves out a private space as a site of internal resistance. In other words, the female body becomes a historical document and a witness to the impact of colonialism and local patronage. This essay will explore how *The Girl from the Coast* maps three dimensions of power over the female body: as an object of feudal transaction, a target of social discipline, and a discourse of subaltern resistance.

The Legitimization of Patriarchy and Feudalism over the Female Body in the feudal Javanese society portrayed by Pramoedya, a woman’s body is considered the “property” of her father or husband. When Mariasari is taken as a wife by a nobleman, she is forced to abandon her personal name and adopt a title according to her new status: *Mas Nganten* (“young bride”)—a term that affirms the husband’s power over her body and existence. The absence of a personal name symbolizes the erasure of subjectivity within the patriarchal structure, where women are positioned as “the Other,” in line with Simone de Beauvoir’s theory. Through this narrative, Pramoedya

reveals how feudalism and patriarchy conspire to reduce women to property—depriving them of rights and personal agency.

The Body as an Object of Feudal Transaction shown in the marriage transaction in *The Girl from the Coast* reflects the economic logic of feudalism: the female body is exchanged for social status, wealth, and political legitimacy. Mariasari, though from a poor fishing family, suddenly enjoys the luxury of a noble household—yet she loses her freedom of movement, authority over property, and even the right to communicate with her family. Practices such as “salary cuts” or crop-sharing on rice harvests are analogous to the exploitation of her labor and fertility, which are “harvested.” Here, feudal power extracts economic value from the female body, treating it as a site of social commodity production rather than as a sovereign subject.

Foucault asserts that modern power manages the body through discipline and surveillance. Although set in a feudal context, *The Girl from the Coast* presents similar practices in discipline and violence on the female body: Mariasari is strictly monitored by household servants (Mbok) and her husband's family, from her waking hours to her manner of speech. Physical violence—such as beatings or threats—is also portrayed as a mechanism for internalizing norms. Her body is forced into obedience, absorbing the belief that loyalty and submission are her “destiny.” By highlighting this disciplinary process, Pramoedya reveals how patriarchal norms enact biopolitics on women, constructing “ideal” citizens who are tightly controlled.

The Body as a Locus of Subaltern Resistance though imprisoned by structural forces, Mariasari preserves small pockets of resistance. Self-reflection in the mirror, childhood memories by the shore, and folk songs become sources of inner strength. When her husband abandons her, her body is no longer bound by social contracts; she chooses to return to her village of origin. This decision represents a liberation of the body from the power of transaction: she regains autonomy over her choices, even if she remains materially poor. This transformation shows that the female body can become a site of emancipation, where the post-feudal subject renegotiates the meaning of honor.

Pramoedya's choice of narrative perspective helps shape the discourse of power surrounding the female body. It is the narratives of the female body and the politics of representation, although the third-person narrator brings readers closer to Mariasari's inner world, physical descriptions occasionally reproduce objectification—highlighting the smoothness of her skin, the gracefulness of her movements, or the allure of her gaze. This reflects a dialectic: on one hand, her body is the object of the gaze, yet on the other, she manipulates her charm as a survival strategy. This technique underscores Kate Millett's [7] theory of patriarchy as a system that burdens women through sexualized imagery, while also providing the character with an opportunity to reverse that aesthetic value into a tool for negotiation.

The feudal morality internalized by Mariasari Body, Sexuality, and Feudal Morality is reflected in how she suppresses her sexual desires—when her husband refuses her, she never questions her own longing. Her body is labeled “naughty” if it violates social norms, while her husband enjoys unrestricted freedom. This double standard exposes a dual mechanism of power: patriarchy monopolizes the female voice to regulate her own sexuality. Pramoedya critiques this hypocrisy by portraying Mariasari’s suffering, underscoring how the female body often becomes a battleground for moral values that serve to sustain the status quo.

The Narratives of coastal people beyond Mariasari’s body, the bodies of fishermen, farmers, and coastal sex workers are portrayed as a marginalized community. Their shared movements—assembling boats, rowing jukungs, or singing at night markets—become expressions of collective bodily resistance against the dominance of the aristocracy. Here, the body shifts from a disciplined unit to a manifestation of subaltern solidarity. Pramoedya celebrates the togetherness of coastal bodies as political potential—marking that emancipation is not merely an individual affair, but a social process involving many bodies.

The Body in Post-Feudal Transition happen when Japan assumed control over the colonial administration, feudal structures began to erode. Traditional marriage institutions lost their grip, and women gained wider access to education and the labor market. Mariasari briefly experienced the ripple of these changes—her body was no longer constantly surveilled by the aristocracy. The novel captures this fleeting moment as a transitional phase: a female body once treated as property still struggles to find its footing in a newly opened space of freedom. This period marks the onset of post-feudalism, where the legitimacy of power is no longer strictly tied to inherited status.

Contemporary Implications in *The Girl from the Coast* [8] remains highly relevant for contemporary gender studies in Southeast Asia, as it reveals how feudal legacies continue to cast a shadow over modern women's bodies—from child marriage and human trafficking to the stigmatization of “immoral” bodies. The novel reminds us that true emancipation must reach the body as the zero-point of power negotiation. Understanding Mariasari’s fictional experiences helps activists, educators, and policymakers design interventions that restore women's bodily rights from freedom of movement to reproductive autonomy.

Conclusion

In *The Girl from the Coast* [8], the female body serves as a terrain of dual power, a space where feudal patriarchy exploits, and where subaltern resistance traces a path toward restored dignity. Pramoedya affirms that every curve, every pain, and every choice of a woman's body holds the potential for social transformation. Examining the body in this novel challenges dominant narratives, asserting that gender emancipation

demands full recognition of the body as a sovereign subject—not an object to be detached and rearranged by systems of power.

Commemorating 100 years of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's literary legacy, *Gadis Pantai* (*The Girl from the Coast*) remains relevant as an emancipatory narrative that unveils the dynamics of gender and class power relations within Indonesian society. By integrating feminist theories from Simone de Beauvoir [2], Kate Millett [7], and Rosemarie Tong [9], it becomes evident that the protagonist's struggle is not merely against Bendoro, but against an entire oppressive social system. Pramoedya's literature serves as a vehicle for liberation, and *Gadis Pantai* [10] stands as its manifesto.

The Girl from the Coast [8] is not merely a tragic tale of a woman marginalized by the system, it is a mirror of the collective wounds inherited from patriarchal and feudal cultures. In her silence, the protagonist poses a shattering question: how long must women submit to destinies determined by others? Through the lens of socialist feminism, readers are invited not only to witness suffering, but to recognize the seeds of awareness that grow within limitation. In today's Indonesia, where women's voices are still frequently suppressed by norms and power, *The Girl from the Coast* [8] becomes a quiet yet resounding call: that resistance can be born from awareness, and that literature holds the power to change how we perceive the world.

References

- [1] M. Muhibbuddin, *Pramoedya Ananta Toer : Catatan dari Balik Penjara*. Araska Publisher, 2019.
- [2] S. de Beauvoir, "The Second Sex," in *Social Theory Re-Wired*, 3rd ed., Routledge, 2023.
- [3] "Feodalisme: Pengertian, Sejarah, dan Ciri-Ciri Masyarakat Feodal - Nasional Katadata.co.id." Accessed: Aug. 07, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://katadata.co.id/berita/nasional/6200a36a01aa8/feodalisme-pengertian-sejarah-dan-ciri-ciri-masyarakat-feodal>
- [4] C. A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Harvard University Press, 1989.
- [5] B. Hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Pluto Press, 2000.
- [6] "Budaya Patriarki Masih Jadi Pemicu Utama Kesenjangan Gender di Indonesia." Accessed: Aug. 07, 2025. [Online]. Available: https://mediaindonesia.com/humaniora/656182/budaya-patriarki-masih-jadi-pemicu-utama-kesenjangan-gender-di-indonesia#goog_rewarded
- [7] K. Millett, *Sexual Politics*. Columbia University Press, 2016.
- [8] P. A. Toer, *The girl from the Coast*. New York, London: Hyperion ; Turnaround, 2003.
- [9] R. Tong and T. F. Botts, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 6th ed. New York: Routledge, 2024. doi: 10.4324/9781003016939.
- [10] P. A. Toer, *Gadis pantai*. Hasta Mitra, 1987.