



# Rewriting the East: Bridging Past and Present Through Aesthetic Resistance in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Child of All Nations (Postcolonial Approach)

Nani Cahyani<sup>1</sup>, B. Venkat Rao<sup>2</sup>, Dana Amirbayeva<sup>3</sup>, Sanaria Maneba<sup>4</sup>, Syahrir<sup>5</sup>  
Language Education, Dayanu Ikhsanuddin University, Baubau, Sultra<sup>1</sup>  
English Literature, English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India<sup>2</sup>  
Language Education, Caspian University, Almyty, Kazakhstan<sup>3</sup>  
Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Dayanu Ikhsanuddin University, Baubau, Sultra<sup>4</sup>  
Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Muhammadiyah Palopo<sup>5</sup>  
Corresponding E-Mail: Email: [nanicahyani201@gmail.com](mailto:nanicahyani201@gmail.com)

Received: 2025-10-28 Accepted: 2025-12-31

DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v13i2.9982

## Abstract

This article revealed the concept of aesthetic resistance in Pramoedya's *Child of All Nations*: a shift from a battleground to an intellectual resistance. Explored aesthetic resistance function as a political act in the text of *Child of All Nations*, and it aimed to reveal the legacies of the oppressive structures that formed the present-day systems. The method employed was descriptive and qualitative, where postcolonial theory served as the analytical lens that framed the colonial epistemologies from past to present. The results finding of this article, *Child of All Nations*, by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, demonstrates that aesthetic form operates as a mode of resistance. Through narrative style and the act of writing, Minke asserts control over his thoughts and reclaims the authority to define reality. By challenging the colonial narratives imposed upon him, the novel reveals aesthetic resistance to challenging power. Thus, the conclusion of this article is that the aesthetic resistance reclaims narrative authority and rewrites the East from the perspective of postcolonial identity.

**Keywords:** *aesthetic resistance, postcolonial theory, rewrite the East*

## Introduction

“Hidup sungguh sangat sederhana yang hebat-hebat hanya tafsirannya  
(Life is trully very simple. The only exaggerated things are the  
interpretations).

“Pramoedya Ananta Toer”

The works of Pramoedya Ananta Toer have long generated controversy in Indonesia. Due to political anxieties and misinterpretations, his writings were banned by authorities who accused them of promoting Marxist–Leninist teachings. These accusations framed his narratives as threats capable of empowering the weak and encouraging anti-colonial sentiment. In reality, Pramoedya's literary contributions speak profoundly to humanity, foregrounding hope, justice, compassion, and the dignity of marginalized people (Thorne, 2006).

His novel *Child of All Nations* exemplifies this spirit by presenting a strategic act of rewriting the East through the eyes of a Javanese native protagonist, Minke, whose intellectual awakening becomes a form of resistance against colonial domination. As Lestari et al. (2025) explain, colonialism operates through settlement expansion and economic exploitation, both driven by political and geopolitical interests. This historical context provides a necessary foundation for understanding how Pramoedya critiques colonial systems.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study draws on postcolonial perspectives, particularly Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and Homi Bhabha's ideas of mimicry and ambivalence. Said (1993) argues that colonialism is enabled through knowledge production that constructs the West (Occident) as superior, rational, and modern, while positioning the East (Orient) as inferior, irrational, and backward. Such oppositional binaries justify domination and shape colonial discourse. Meanwhile, Bhabha (1994) highlights how colonial authority classifies colonized communities through artificial divisions, sustaining systems of control.

These theoretical insights illuminate how Pramoedya's text challenges such constructions. As Cahyani (2023) notes, postcolonial writing crosses geographical and cultural boundaries, enabling authors to assert linguistic, historical, and cultural perspectives that resist the colonial center. In *Child of All Nations*, Pramoedya reclaims the right to narrate the East, portraying it not as uncivilized or marginal, but as a dynamic site of cultural production and self-renewal.

Aesthetic resistance becomes a central element in this process. Through the novel, Pramoedya emphasizes the transformative power of writing as an educational and emancipatory tool for common people. Aesthetic resistance refers to literary strategies that challenge domination, hegemony, and Western superiority. According to Ashcroft et al. (2002), such resistance manifests through abrogation and appropriation: dismantling the colonizer's language through local expressions and reshaping colonial narratives including their norms and linguistic structures to undermine Eurocentrism. By distancing himself from colonial literary forms and amplifying subjugated voices, Pramoedya crafts a narrative that not only recounts historical events but also critiques colonialism through artistic and intellectual expression.

Previous research on *Child of All Nations* has primarily examined its portrayal of colonial oppression, national awakening, and the protagonist's political consciousness. Scholars have explored themes such as journalism, nationalism, and

identity formation; however, relatively little attention has been given to the novel's aesthetic dimension as a site of resistance. Existing analyses tend to focus on political or historical aspects, leaving unexplored how Pramoedya's narrative choices enact resistance within the colonial context.

This article addresses that gap by applying a postcolonial theoretical lens to examine how aesthetic resistance operates throughout the novel. By highlighting the artistic strategies embedded in *Child of All Nations*, this study reveals how Pramoedya's narrative techniques function as subtle yet powerful critiques of colonial authority.

### **Research Question**

This led to the research question: How does aesthetic resistance function as a political act in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Child of All Nations*?

### **Research Objective**

This study aims to examine how aesthetic resistance functions as a political act in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Child of All Nations*. It focuses on analyzing the novel's aesthetic resistance particularly its narrative structure within its historical context, to reveal how the text expresses political resistance through a postcolonial framework

### **Significance of the Research**

This study offers valuable contributions to postcolonial studies by deepening the understanding of how aesthetic resistance operates in the works of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, particularly in *Child of All Nations*

### **Method**

This article employs a descriptive and qualitative method. The method is used to seek aesthetic resistance in Pramoedya's *Child of All Nations*. According to Cresswell (2009), qualitative research typically collect data by examining documents, observing the characters' words and behaviours. This article uses a postcolonial lens, allowing the power struggles and hidden inequalities within it to come into clearer view.

### **Data Collection**

This article gathers the data from the primary text of *Child of All Nations* published in 1997, printed by Penguin Books USA. The secondary data sources from others sources that related to the study such as website, dictionary, journals, and some books that support the data analysis.

### **Techniques of Data Analysis**

The analysis is conducted using a postcolonial theoretical lens. This perspective enables the researcher to identify how colonial power structures operate within the text and how characters negotiate, resist, or reimagine these structures. By foregrounding issues such as power relations, marginalization, identity formation, and cultural negotiation, the postcolonial framework helps reveal layers of meaning that might otherwise remain obscured.

## Results

### Aesthetic resistance as a political act

In *Child of All Nations*, Pramoedya Ananta Toer demonstrates how aesthetic form, including its style and structure, shapes the narrative and becomes a site of resistance. Instead of relying on physical defiance, the novel reveals how resistance can emerge through narrative techniques and the act of writing itself. Minke, for instance, learns that even under the heavy weight of colonial power, he still has control over his own thoughts. This idea becomes clear when he reflects, "Thinking is a freedom no one can seize" (Toer, 1980, pp. 165–175).

Although simple, the statement carries the strength of someone who refuses to be conquered from within. As the story unfolds, Minke realizes that his writing, humble as it may seem at first, can pierce the silence that colonialism attempts to impose. When he acknowledges that "writing is the only weapon I have" (Toer, 1980, pp. 250–260), it becomes more than a personal confession; it marks a turning point in his intellectual awakening. Through his articles, which expose the cruelty of the plantation system, Minke transforms his words into acts of moral and aesthetic courage.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) provides a foundational lens for understanding how colonial produced knowledge about the East in ways that justified domination. Said argues that the West constructed the East as passive, irrational, civilized West. In *Child of All Nations*, Pramoedya dismantles such colonial constructions by giving narrative authority to Indigenous voices, particularly through Minke, a native Javanese protagonist educated in Dutch institutions yet increasingly critical of colonial ideology.

In *Child of All Nations*, the line "You know, writers can often see aspects of things which others cannot" (Toer, 139) reinforces this shift in perspective, revealing how Minke comes to view writing as a quicker and more impactful means of societal transformation. Through this insight, his writing becomes not merely a personal expression but a deliberate political act, allowing him to engage directly with the injustices of colonial rule and articulate resistance from within the very system that once sought to silence voices like his.

Minke's complex position within colonial society exemplifies what Bhabha (1994) calls mimicry, the ambivalent process in which the colonized subject imitates the colonizer, "almost the same, but not quite." His early admiration for Dutch language, culture, and literature reflects this dynamic, yet the novel also traces his disillusionment as he recognizes the ideological limits of this imitation. This shift from mimicry to resistance becomes the foundation of his aesthetic resistance: by using the very literary forms and linguistic tools acquired through colonial education, Minke turns writing into a medium that challenges, rather than reinforces, colonial authority. Through this transformation, mimicry becomes not a mark of compliance but a strategy for undermining the structures that produced it.

Finally, the concept of aesthetic resistance, drawn from postcolonial literary criticism, frames the novel as more than a political narrative, personal reflection, or piece of oral storytelling. Pramoedya subverts Eurocentric literary forms by embedding an alternative aesthetic grounded in Indigenous experience, thereby reclaiming narrative space from colonial dominance. In doing so, he demonstrates that aesthetic resistance is not only a stylistic choice but a political intervention: it allows marginalized voices to redefine how history is told, to challenge imposed hierarchies of knowledge, and to assert cultural agency in the face of oppression. Ultimately, aesthetic resistance matters because it transforms literature into a site where power can be contested and new possibilities for collective identity and liberation can emerge.

### **Aesthetic resistance challenges power**

In *Child of All Nations*, aesthetic resistance allows Minke to challenge colonial power by reclaiming the authority to describe reality on his own terms. As he becomes increasingly aware of the injustices surrounding him, he recognizes that writing can confront and destabilize the narratives imposed by the colonizer. This shift is captured when he declares, *"If I don't write, I am not a human being"* (Toer, 261). The statement marks his realization that writing is not merely expression, it is a form of existence and resistance. By using the colonial language to articulate Indigenous suffering, critique exploitation, and assert political consciousness, Minke disrupts the Dutch monopoly over knowledge and representation. Thus, through Minke's character, the novel shows that aesthetic resistance challenges power by transforming storytelling into a site where colonial authority is questioned, exposed, and symbolically overturned.

A powerful moment occurs when Minke reflects on the purpose of writing: *"Words can wound more deeply than a knife"* (Toer, 207). This line reveals Minke's growing understanding that writing is not passive but a force capable of unsettling power. In the novel, he comes to realize that colonial violence is not only physical but also ideological maintained through silence, distortion, and the erasure of Indigenous narratives. By choosing to write, Minke weaponizes language against this system. His articles and observations begin to expose the contradictions of colonial rule, challenge the myth of European superiority, and amplify the experiences of those the colonial archive ignores.

Through this shift, aesthetic resistance becomes a political act: Minke uses narrative, and emotional truth to counter the colony's official discourse. His words "wound" the colonial order by revealing its cruelty, unsettling its authority, and giving voice to those it attempts to suppress. Literature, therefore, becomes a battlefield where power is contested through meaning, memory, and representation.

## Discussion

In *Child of All Nations*, aesthetic resistance emerges not only through Minke's political awakening but through his deep conviction that writing itself is a form of existence. This is evident when he declares, "If I don't write, I am not a human being" (Toer, 261). This statement shows that for Minke, writing becomes inseparable from dignity, identity, and agency, dimensions systematically denied under colonial rule. By insisting on the necessity of writing, he asserts his right to define reality on his own terms, challenging the colonial authority that seeks to control representation and silence Indigenous voices. Through this lens, aesthetic resistance becomes a profound political act. Minke uses narrative to reclaim humanity for himself and his people, transforming literature into a space where colonial power is contested and where new possibilities for self-definition and collective memory can emerge.

Other quotes that reveal the force of aesthetic resistance in *Child of All Nations* appears when Minke reflects on the responsibility of bearing witness: "If I remain silent, then I am betraying my own people" (Toer, 188). This statement underscores his growing realization that silence serves colonial power by allowing injustice to persist unchallenged. Speaking and writing, therefore, become moral and political imperatives. Minke's refusal to remain silent transforms his literary activity into an act of defiance that exposes exploitation, gives visibility to the oppressed, and interrupts the narratives preferred by the colonial state. Through this shift, Pramoedya shows that aesthetic resistance is rooted in the ethical duty to testify, an obligation that compels the colonized subject not only to critique domination but also to reclaim the authority to narrate their own history.

## Conclusion

The novel highlights the urgency of challenging Dutch policies through intellectual awakening and aesthetic expression. Minke's growing awareness reflects a form of intellectual resistance, a refusal to accept the narratives imposed by colonial authority. At the same time, his commitment to writing, storytelling, and journalism becomes an act of aesthetic resistance, using language, creativity, and narrative power to reclaim dignity and reshape collective consciousness. Thus, the article concludes that aesthetic resistance restores narrative control and redefines the East through a postcolonial lens.

## References

- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. (2002). *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practices in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Routledge.
- A Tribute to Indonesian Novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer, by Alison Thorne, October 2006. FSP, Australia, History International
- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*: London and New York. Routledge
- Cahyani, Nani. "Social Differences and Discrimination in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *The Girl from the Coast*." *IJCRT*, vol. 10, no. 1, January 2022, doi: 2320-2882.

Accessed 8 August 2025

- Child of All Nations. Trans. Max Lane. The United States of America. Penguin Books. USA 1997
- Cresswell, J. W. (2009). *Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research* (3rd ed.). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.1128/microbe.4.485.1>
- Gramsci, Antonio, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci: Edited and Translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey GoGwilt, Chris. "The Vanishing Genre of the Nyai Narrative: Reading Genealogies of English."* Nowell Smith. International Pub., 1992.
- GoGwilt, Chris. "The Vanishing Genre of the Nyai Narrative: Reading Genealogies of English." Nowell Smith. International Pub., 1992.
- Gogwilt, Christopher Llyod. "The voice of Pramoedya Ananta Toer: Passages, interviews, and reflection from the Mute of Soliloquy and Pramoedya's North American Tour." *Cultural Critique*, vol. 55. No. 1, 2003, pp. 217-246, doi: 10.1353/cul.2003.0048.
- Hooks, Bell. 1990. "Marginality as a site of Resistance," in R. Ferguson et al. (eds.), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Lestari, S., Winarni, R., & Sumarwati, S. (2025). Representation of Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality in the novel *Rara Mendut* by YB Manguwijaya. *Studies in English Language and Education*, 12(2), 1008-1022.
- McLeod, J. (2010). *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2nd ed). Manchester University Press
- Pramoedya, Ananta Toer. "Child of All Nations." Translated from Indonesian by Max Lane. (1991)
- Priambodo, B. B. (2018). Positioning adat law in Indonesia's legal system: Historical discourse and current development on customary law. *Udayana Journal of Law and Culture*, 2(2), 140-164.
- Said, E. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. Chatto and Windus
- Vandenbosch, A. (1943). The effect of Dutch rule on the civilization of the East Indies. *American Journal of Sociology*, 48(4), 498-502.