



## The Agrarian Questions of Decolonization: Revisiting Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Frantz Fanon's Works on Land and Peasant Questions

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**Abstract:** The paper explores the connection between agrarian issues and the process of decolonization in Indonesia. It argues that key factors, such as agrarian transformation and changes in property relations, are vital for genuine decolonization. Without transforming political economy relations, the decolonization process is considered artificial and limited to changing only the political structure of rule without altering the fundamental political economy relations established and grounded within hundreds of years of the global division of labor. One problem identified in Euro-centric agrarian studies scholarship is the lack of consideration for national liberation, particularly regarding land and peasant issues in the Global South (Moyo, Jha, & Yeros, 2013). In response to this critique, the paper examines the perspectives of two influential thinkers: Pramoedya Ananta Toer from Indonesia and Frantz Fanon from Algeria. It argues that both thinkers address the agrarian questions of decolonization in their respective contexts of Indonesia and Algeria. The paper will analyze the parallel ideas of Pramoedya and Fanon, highlighting the critical role of land and the peasantry in fostering national consciousness and generating decolonization.

**Keywords:** Agrarian Questions, Decolonization, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Child of All Nations, Frantz Fanon, Wretched of the Earth

### Introduction

The conversation about decolonization has recently gained global attention and has become a prominent topic of discourse for the Indonesian public and scholars on Indonesia. In 2022, the public debate has intensified in response to Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte's apology for the 250 years of slavery under Dutch rule, which he described as a "crime against humanity" (CNN Indonesia 2022). This statement has sparked reactions from the Indonesian public, who connect it to the historical context of Dutch colonialism in the archipelago. Rutte's apology, however,

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aimed to encompass all former colonies that endured slavery under the Dutch Empire, which extended across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Several days before the Dutch Prime Minister’s statement, the Indonesian public’s attention was drawn to the ratification of the new Draft of Law on the Indonesian Criminal Code<sup>2</sup> on 6 December 2022. The Minister of Law and Human Rights, Yasonna H. Laoly, regarded this event as a historic milestone, noting that Indonesia has developed its own Criminal Code, distinct from the Dutch colonial code that had been in use for 104 years (Sandi 2022). While the Vice Minister stated, “The primary goal of the draft is decolonization, which involves efforts to eliminate colonial law...marking a significant advantage of the new Criminal Code.” (Merdeka.com 2022). However, constitutional law expert Bivitri Susanti disagreed with the notion that the new Law on Indonesian Criminal Codes represents a decolonization process. She argued, “The characteristics of colonial law are present in several articles of the new draft”, particularly concerning the issues of freedom and order (Suryarandika 2022).

The public debate surrounding the Dutch apology and the draft of Law on Indonesian Criminal Code controversy is tied to the term of decolonization. Decolonization involves the transfer of political and physical power from the colonial authorities to the colonized populations, who strive for freedom from colonial rule. This struggle can manifest either through violent uprisings to overthrow colonial control or negotiations to achieve sovereignty as an independent nation. Indonesia’s independence, officially declared on 17 August 1945, followed by a combination of armed conflict and diplomatic negotiations until 1949, exemplifies the decolonization process. The question remains: did Indonesia’s independence in 1945, which lasted for 80 years, fundamentally change the colonial patterns, institutions, and networks that have shaped Indonesian society for centuries? Is the majority of people and vulnerable groups in Indonesia experienced improvements in their living conditions since the end of colonialism?

The decolonization process reached a pivotal point in 1965 with the rise of Suharto’s New Order regime, which replaced Sukarno’s Old Order regime through violent means. During the New Order period, the phenomenon of “old state in new society” (Anderson 1983) still operated within the existing colonial state infrastructure framework. This colonial infrastructure included not only roads and buildings but also institutions, practices, networks, and social relations rooted in colonial ideas, meanings, consciousness, and imagination. While the colonialists have departed, their infrastructure persists in the post-colonial world (Anderson 1983, 477; Stoler 2016, 4). In examining the living conditions of rural communities, Jan Breman, a distinguished agrarian scholar, concluded from decades of research in Indonesia that the lasting impact of Dutch colonialism was:

“The poor and landless lower classes had no choice but to seek work and income far from the farms and villages. The search for fortune outside the village, in the absence of permanent employment and decent wages, for the majority of the masses, resulted in little or no improvement in life that was threatening (Breman 2024, 272).”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>RKHUP (Rancangan Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana) or Draft of laws on Criminal Codes.

<sup>3</sup> See Jan Breman (2024, 195) regarding comments on the continuing marginalization of the working class and lower class in the post-colonial era.



The paper explores the connection between agrarian issues and the process of decolonization. It argues that key factors, such as agrarian transformation and changes in property relations, are vital for genuine decolonization. Without transforming political economy relations, the decolonization process is considered artificial and limited to changing only the political structure of rule without altering the fundamental political economy relations established and grounded within hundreds of years of the global division of labor. One problem identified in Euro-centric agrarian studies scholarship is the lack of consideration for national liberation, particularly regarding land and peasant issues in the Global South (Moyo, Jha, & Yeros, 2013). The discourse of agrarian questions has its historical specificity concerning time and place (McMichael, 2013). Politicians, activists, and scholars from various countries ask agrarian questions differently. In the North, the discourse goes back to Kautsky's seminal work, "The Agrarian Question," highlighting the development of capitalism and its penetration in German rural areas (1988). Sam Moyo, Praveen Jha, and Paris Yeros (2013) argue there is a Eurocentric element of the agrarian questions from the North that stresses the backwardness-industrialization dichotomy. The dichotomy does not include the question of national liberation, land and peasant elements.

In response to this critique, the paper examines the perspectives of two influential thinkers: Pramoedya Ananta Toer from Indonesia and Frantz Fanon from Algeria. It argues that both thinkers address the agrarian questions of decolonization in their respective contexts of Indonesia and Algeria. The paper will analyze the parallel ideas of Pramoedya and Fanon, highlighting the critical role of land and the peasantry in fostering national consciousness and generating decolonization. The land question and the national question are the twin characters of the agrarian question (Moraes 2012). From this viewpoint, the agrarian questions are also the agrarian questions of decolonization. The transition in Asia, Africa and Latin America are different from the European transition of feudalism to capitalism. Instead in the three continents there are transition regarding incorporation into capitalist world system (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1987) as the beginning of colonialism and decolonization as transition from colonial to post-colonial world.

The *transition* process emphasizes the diachronic aspect of time as societies evolve from one period to another, become a significant focus for historians studying decolonization in Indonesia. Collaborative works such as those by Thomas Lindblad and Peter Post (2009) on Indonesia and Marc Frey, Ronald W. Pruessen, and Tan Tai Yong (2004) on Southeast Asia examine the decolonization process as a *transition* from colonial to post-colonial periods. Lindblad and Post (2009) argue that while decolonization is often viewed through a political lens, its economic dimensions are frequently overlooked. They define economic decolonization as the *transition* from a colonial economy to a national one, which requires three key elements: integrating the private sector, competent administrative capabilities, and access to capital and knowledge. In contrast, Frey, Pruessen, and Yong (2004) investigate decolonization's political and economic processes in a comparative context across Southeast Asian regions.

Other collaborative project, such as "Perspektif Baru Penulisan Sejarah Indonesia" (Nordholt, Purwanto, & Saptari, 2008), present a fresh approach to Indonesian historiography, moving away from the dominant narrative shaped by New Order history writing to redefine the historical narrative within the framework of decolonization. Another collaborative research by Indonesian historians from the University of Gajah Mada and their foreign counterparts has led



to significant advancements concerning the decolonization of Indonesian knowledge. Two special issues of the journal *Lembaran Sejarah* were published in 2020 and 2021 under the theme “Indonesian Knowledge Decolonization.” A key aspect of this collaborative effort is the application of the “history of science” approach as a framework to examine various decolonization processes across fields such as agrarian studies, geology, health, inter-ethnic relations, and the publishing industry. This research not only explores the transfer of knowledge during the 1950s-1970s—such as through vocational education and geological training (Fakih, 2021)—but also emphasizes the creation and production of knowledge like agrarian knowledge (Luthfi 2020) that emerges from synthesizing the colonial experiences of Indonesia’s founding founders with the Western knowledge they acquired.

Discussions on decolonization within the academic sphere highlight the transitional nature of the period from colonial rule to independence. This transition involves two key aspects: transfer and replacement. The transfer aspect refers to the handover of sovereignty and control over political and economic power, including governance and economic resources, from foreign colonial governments to local elites. In contrast, replacement pertains to the alteration of structural positions—whether political or economic—previously controlled by white colonialists and now occupied by colonized people of color. Frantz Fanon emphasizes that substantive colonial relationships often remain, even after the transition to independence. An example he provided is when the President of Gabon told the President of France at a meeting in Paris: “‘Gabon is an independent country, but nothing has changed, the status quo continues’”. In fact the only change is that Monsieur M’ba is president of the Republic of Gabon and he is the guest of the president of the French Republic” (Fanon 2021, 28). Thus, simply transition including replacing colonial elites with national elites does not guarantee meaningful change, as previous colonial relationships frequently persist. These are the issues and challenges faced by countries undergoing decolonization as a transition.

The paper will focus primarily on Indonesia’s decolonization process rather than Algeria’s situation. The reason for this emphasis is to highlight the social context surrounding Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s thoughts. The contributions of Indonesian anti-colonial and decolonization thinkers have not been widely recognized or debated within the international scholarly community, including in agrarian studies. By presenting Pramoedya’s views on anti-colonialism and decolonization and comparing them with more internationally acclaimed figures such as Frantz Fanon, we aim to demonstrate that Indonesia has significant anti-colonial thinkers worthy of consideration on the global stage. The following section will examine Frantz Fanon’s anti-colonial idea in his work “The Wretched of the Earth” (2021). The second section will explore Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s novel “Child of all Nations” (1996) where the story of Minke, the protagonist in the novel, meet Trunodungso, a peasant living in the surrounding Java sugar plantation. The third section will discuss Fanon and Pramoedya views on the challenges of decolonization and the reintegration of decolonizing countries or recolonization into the structure of new empire and capitalist world system.

### **Colonization or decolonization**

Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (2021) can be considered a seminal work on the agrarian questions of decolonization. Fanon recognizes that the Algerian peasantry knows they have only two fates: “colonization or decolonization: it is simply a power struggle” (2021, 23).



Fanon considered the Algerian peasantry one of the crucial groups that fought in the Algerian war of independence from 1954 to 1962. Scholars have noted in *The Wretched of the Earth* the significance of the peasantry as one of the key actor in the Algerian revolution (Perinbam 1973; Wallerstein 1979) and the importance of land for the Algerian people (Clare 2013). However, none has integrated the peasant experience and land issues in Fanon's work into the broader agrarian questions addressed in critical agrarian studies.

Fanon first asks the question, "What are the forces in the colonial period which offer new channels, new agents of empowerment for the violence of the colonized?" (2021, 21) Three agencies in the nationalist movements are political parties, intellectuals, and business elites. These three actors in Algerian nationalist movements did not consider the peasantry essential to the Algerian decolonization struggle (Fanon 2021, 23 & 65). While the leaders of the nationalist movement largely overlooked the peasantry, Frantz Fanon argued in his analysis that they were actually the true revolutionary force. He believed the peasants had no other option but to fight for decolonization, as they were most severely impacted by colonialism. Their choices were limited to "colonization or decolonization" (2021, 23).

Several issues led nationalist movements to overlook the peasantry and rural populations. *First*, the leaders of these nationalist movements, who had gained modern organizational knowledge from Europe, assumed that, based on the experience of the proletarian movement in industrial countries, peasants lacked political awareness (2021, 66). This assumption of the Algerian nationalist movement is the target of criticism put forward by Sam Moyo, Praveen Jha, and Paris Yeros (2013) that the view of the experience of agrarian transformation and the agrarian question in Europe was not necessarily relevant to countries in the South. Instead of engaging with or gaining insights from the peasants' lived experiences in the countryside, the actors of the Algerian nationalist movement relied on preconceived notions derived from European experiences.

*Second*, the issue of feudalism and social differentiation in rural areas is not given enough attention. One of the main obstacles to the connection between the nationalist movement and the rural masses is the persistence of feudalism, where traditional leaders still hold power. This traditional authority is often utilized and reinforced by colonialism to support the occupation (2021, 65). Additionally, colonial powers have exploited conflicts and tensions between villagers and the urban-based nationalist movement (2021, 67). For Fanon, the mistake of the nationalist movement is that "Instead of integrating the history of the village and conflicts between tribes and clans into the people's struggle, the history of the future nation has a singular disregard for minor local histories and stamps on the only thing relevant to the nation's actuality (2021, 68).

In this development, a faction of the militant group within the nationalist movements clashed with the national bourgeoisie and the colonial state. The militant nationalists faced repression from the colonial authorities and were expelled from urban areas (Fanon 2021, 78). The period marked a new beginning for some aspects of the nationalist movement. As a result, the group sought to engage with the peasantry since they could no longer operate in towns. Their perspective changed as they interacted with and learned from the rural population. They discovered that the Algerian peasantry held a distinct perspective on the nation and the national struggle (Fanon 2021, 79). This mutual engagement between the Algerian peasantry and the



militant nationalist groups helped to strengthen the decolonization movements (Fanon 2021, 79).

### **The cork on which the Netherlands floats**

Pramoedya Ananta Toer's historical novel bring us to anti-colonial imagination in fiction and the history of peasants in Sidoarjo, East Java, Indonesia. *Child of All Nations*<sup>4</sup> is set in the early twentieth century, where sugar plantations in the Tulangan Subdistrict of Sidoarjo represent the peak of Java's sugar production from 1900-1930. Pramoedya's fiction expressed, in general, the experiences of peasants in Sidoarjo District during the colonial sugar plantation era. Various commentators have acknowledged the role of peasants in transforming the consciousness of the novel's main protagonist (Foulcher 1981, 12-13; Setiadi 2014, 168-169) However, none assert that Pramoedya's work represents agrarian questions articulated through a literary style. Hilmar Farid Setiadi is the only commentator who further explores the novel's themes of peasants, land, and capital issues. Nevertheless, he does not link or interpret Pramoedya's novel as addressing agrarian questions within the context of agrarian studies. Pramoedya's thought is parallel to Fanon's, underlining the critical role of the peasantry in shaping the national consciousness.

During colonial times, the Algerian peasants in Fanon's work belonged to the real world, while the peasant character in "Child of All Nations" is fictional. Nonetheless, the character is relevant in understanding the agrarian questions of decolonization. There are several reasons why *Child of All Nations* accurately reflects the historical reality of the peasantry in Sidoarjo, Indonesia. *First*, scholar Anton Novenanto (2015, 72) links the peasant rebellion depicted in the novel to actual events involving wealthy peasant revolts in the early twentieth century. Novenanto's argument is based on M.R. Fernando's (1995) analysis of the peasant rebellion in the Gedangan Subdistrict of Sidoarjo in 1904. *Second*, the history of the Javanese sugar plantation reveals that the village portrayed in the novel was part of a plantation area in the Tulangan Subdistrict, integral to Sidoarjo's sugar industry since the nineteenth century. Many rice fields in Sidoarjo's villages were converted throughout the nineteenth century into sugar plantations. Between 1832 and 1850, thirteen sugar factories were established in Sidoarjo, including the Tulangan factory referenced in the novel. (Figure 1, see number 11 in the Map).<sup>5</sup>

*Third*, Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Child of All Nations* and the other novels in the tetralogy present his interpretation of the history of the Indonesian national awakening. He employs the novel as a medium for historical writing. In his memoir "The Mute's Soliloquy," which recounts his fourteen years of imprisonment from 1965 to 1979, Pramoedya explains that the tetralogy is rooted in historical events. In October 1973, a team of scholars, journalists, and army officers visited Buru Island to interview prisoners, including Pramoedya himself.

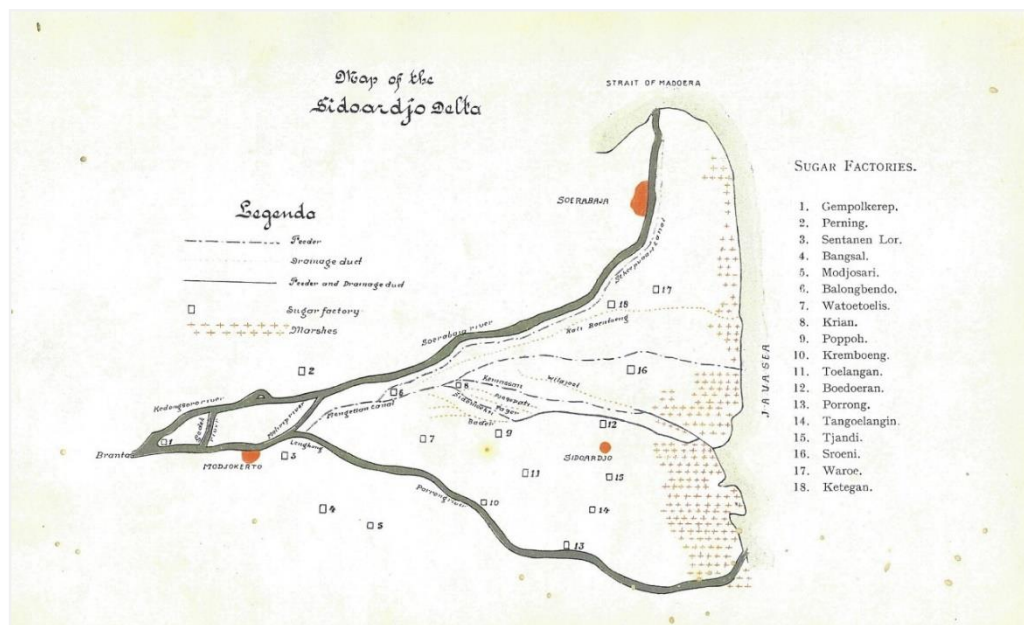
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<sup>4</sup> *Child of All Nations* is the second novel in the Buru tetralogy, which is a four-part novel series consisting of *This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps*, and *House of Glass*.

<sup>5</sup> The list of Sidoarjo Sugar factories in Figure 1 is from numbers 7 to 18, while numbers 1 to 6 are sugar factories located in the Mojokerto district (Quintus 1923). The first sugar factory established in Sidoarjo was Candi (1832) and followed by Buduran (1835), Waru (1835), Tanggulangin (1835), Porong (1838), Watutulis (1838), Popoh Wonoayu (1838), Balongbendo (1838), Krian (1839), Ketegan-Taman (1839), Sruni-Gedangan (1840), Krembung (1847), Tulangan (1850) (Pramana 2018, 50).

During these interviews, he mentioned working on a novel about Indonesia’s national resurgence in the early twentieth century (Toer 1995, 17, 25). Pramoedya elaborated that he had intended to prepare an encyclopedia detailing the history of Indonesian National Awakening movements from 1900 to 1945, which he began working on before the September 1965 coup (Toer 1995, 27). However, after his arrest and the destruction of his home, Pramoedya lost the historical materials he had gathered for the encyclopedia. While on Buru Island, he decided to write the history in literary form, relying on his memory of the historical material he had collected. His narrative captures the socio-historical reality of sugar plantations and factories in the Tulangan Subdistrict, embedding a version of historical reality within his novel.

**Figure 1.** Map of the Sidoarjo Delta and Sugar Factories (Quintus 1923)



Pramoedya’s perspective on the Javanese peasantry as the foundation of the Dutch Empire is particularly striking. In 1842, correspondence between Jean Chretien Baud, the Minister of Colonies in the Netherlands, and the Dutch East Indies government officials highlighted Java’s significance as a source of colonial surplus. The correspondence letters mentioned: “The only system by which Java can remain ‘the cork on which the Netherlands floats’” (Baud 1842 in Fasseur 1992, 57). Pramoedya understood the significance of Java to the Dutch Empire and contended that the Javanese peasantry bore the most tremendous burden and suffered the most, rather than the local Javanese elites and rulers. In the novel, he incorporated the correspondence from Baud into the narration of his protagonist, Minke:

“The anonymous tract Magda Peters had given me spoke about them as the cork upon which the kingdom of the Netherlands floats. And what kind of cork-float? The pamphlet said it was a cork that will be forced to sink one day when its buoyancy has been soaked up. The whole of the kingdom’s and colony’s life floated upon that cork. Any and every foot could step upon its head and shoulders, just as Governor-General



Daendels had literally done long ago; they, the peasants, would accept every burden without protest. They would not complain, it went on to say because for centuries they had known only one kind of fate: the fate of a peasant” (1996, 121).

Minke undergoes a transformation in consciousness through his interactions with the Javanese peasantry. In contrast, Fanon recounts this shift through the experiences of the Algerian nationalist movements as they engaged with the Algerian peasants. Minke gradually realizes that he knows little about his nation and its people during conversations with his friends Jane Maries, a French painter, and Kommer, an Indo-European journalist (Toer 1996, 113–114):

*Minke:* “You think I don’t know my own people.”

*Kommer:* “The Truth is often painful. But that is it, more or less. From your articles, it seems that you know more about the Dutchmen and Indos.”

*Minke:* “That’s not true. I speak excellent Javanese.”

*Kommer:* “That doesn’t mean you know the Javanese people. Have you ever known the villages and hamlets of Java, where most of our people live? You’ve only passed through them. Do you know what the (*peasants*) farmers of Java eat, your own country’s farmer? Most Javanese are (*peasants*) farmers. The Javanese peasant farmers are your people.”

The charge prompts Minke to accompany his mother-in-law, Nyai Ontosoroh, on her visit to her childhood village in Tulangan, Sidoarjo. During the journey, Minke shares his experiences observing peasants working as forced laborers on railway infrastructure. He reflects, “I had known all this since I was small. But only now, traveling along the train, did they abruptly become real inhabitants of my thought” (Toer 1996, 120). While Minke has always been aware of the peasants’ realities, this moment marks a new awakening in his consciousness. He acknowledges, “I knew about the suffering of these peasants, but that knowledge had never lived in my mind as it did now” (Toer 1996, 120). As the train finally enters Sidoarjo, Minke describes the landscape: “...nothing but sugar cane, rippling in waves like a green sea upon purple-green sands. All of it would be cut and carried off to the sugar mills... Everything centered on sugar” (Toer 1996, 121). The world of sugar as a social setting in the novel gives vital context to understand the peasantry in Sidoarjo’s colonial past.

After spending a few days at the residence of Nyai Ontosoroh’s brother, Minke decided to explore the Tulangan villages. While walking through a sugar plantation, he noticed something unusual that caught his attention: a house in the middle of a vast sugar cane field (Toer 1996, 159). Minke observed a furious peasant, visibly irritated with the representative of the sugar factory (Toer 1996, 161). The peasant, Trunodongso, was distressed because the sugar factory demanded that he surrender the last remnants of his land to the plantation. The event was Minke’s first encounter with the issue of peasants’ dispossession. Trunodongso then spoke to Minke:

“...I have already been very patient. My inheritance was...three paddy fields, two dry fields, and this house garden. Three bahus are being used by the mill. I did not happily rent them out but was brutally forced to do so by the mill priyayi, the village





head, all kinds of officials, and God knows how many others! The land was contracted for eighteen months...But now it has been two years! You have to wait until the cane stumps have all been dugout...Those dogs, Ndoro...now even my dry fields – they want those too. The trees will be torn down to make way for the cane! (Toer 1996, 163) “.

Trunodongso continues:

“...I don’t want to rent out my land, but every day I’m threatened, taunted, insulted. Now they threaten that the lane to my house will be close off. If you want to get to your house and land, they say, you’ll have to fly. They have already closed the channels bringing water to my paddy fields. I could not farm the paddy, so I had to rent it out (Toer 1996, 165).”

Child of All Nations highlights the importance of the peasantry as an inseparable part of Indonesia’s identity. Minke’s meeting with Trunodongso serves as a metaphor for the awakening of the national consciousness rooted in the experiences of peasants and their connection to the land. The dialogue between Minke, who represents the intellectual class, and Trunodongso, who symbolizes the lower class masses, parallels the relationship described by Fanon between the nationalist movement and the Algerian peasantry. Pramoedya Toer reflects in his memoir, “Finally, I returned to the world of the village. Furthermore, to the roots of that world. Not down to the bottom, to history, to the basics” (Toer 1995, 39). For Pramoedya, the nation’s history is deeply connected to the experiences and fate of its peasants. When asked if he had ever written about peasants and agricultural issues, he responded that all the peasants bore the costs of the struggle for the Indonesian revolution in 1945 without expecting anything in return, noting, “It is the peasantry that feeds the nation” (1995, 187–188). He further asserted, “Are not all Indonesians descendants of peasants? And is not the Indonesian nation fundamentally a nation of peasants?” (1995, 189). Pramoedya raised agrarian questions, emphasizing that nationhood and decolonization are incomplete if they do not acknowledge the peasantry as the foundation of the nation and the empire.

In the second volume of his memoir, he expressed, “There are indeed those who are hurt when it is said that they descended from peasants. Not necessarily is the offended one a descendant of a nomad, a hunter, or a shepherder; they may themselves be a descendant of a peasant” (Toer 2000, 1). Pramoedya’s perspective resonates with the notion that England’s peasantry is the “Father of the present working class” (Marx 1990, 896). The histories of cities, nations, and empires evolve through centuries of transformation that separate the peasantry from their natural environment. From this perspective, Pramoedya envisions a long-term history where the wisdom of Javanese peasants imparts a vital lesson: “kacang ora ninggalake lanjarane,” which translates to “the apple does not fall far from the tree” in Western wisdom (2000, 2). He acknowledges his ancestors as peasants and recognizes that his father’s education was influenced by peasant values (2000, 4). Pramoedya sees his existence as part of what he calls *mata rantai*, or the chain of human history (2000, 2). This connection between generations extends beyond family and biology to include the entirety of “culture, civilization, and tradition” (Toer 2000, 2). From this perspective, Pramoedya’s view of history underscores the interplay between structure and



agency by positioning peasants as historical actors engaged in an ongoing struggle against capital and empire.

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