



# Social Differences and Discrimination in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *The Girl From the Coast*

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## Abstract

Social Realism has been quite a significant means for writers, painters, poets and artists throughout the past decades, to discuss and depict the social, political and economic situations in their countries through their works. Further explained, the term refers to the social reality of society as the word 'social' refers to people who are part of a particular society, and the term 'realism' refers to the way these people are represented in works of Art or Literature. Writers usually represent the struggle of the common working class in distinction with the upper class through fiction. One such important writer is Pramoedya Ananta Toer, an Indonesian writer, whose works are translated into English and many other languages. Toer's works are mostly banned in Indonesia because of his opposition for tyranny and injustice in his country. His works mostly depict the injustice and glory of human life through autobiographical elements in his novels. *The Girl from The Coast* is a novel based on the true story of his grandmother's marriage and life as a poor fisherman's child entering the world of noblemen and the upper class only to be used as a worthless concubine. This paper is an analysis of the novel by Toer, illustrating the past Feudalist society of Java and the status of women in a Muslim Aristocratic society, where oppression and injustice is the only thing a woman ascending from a poor village can own, while the privilege is given to the nobles in the community. The paper also represents social differences of class applying Marxism theory.

**Keywords: Social realism, economic situations, common working class, feudalist society, oppression, Marxism.**

## INTRODUCTION

Toer's likeliness to expose violence, discrimination and corruption through his works has never been a secret. He constantly creates characters who represent and symbolize traits, notions or a whole class. In a book review, Andrea Kempf conveys that "His characters are less human beings than representatives of his political philosophy—the noble villagers, the evil aristocrats, the resourceful, intelligent peasant girl. Toer is regularly criticized for producing novels that are more polemic than fiction, for creating characters that are symbols of his ideology rather than rounded human beings"(Kempf2).

The events of the novel, *The Girl From the Coast*, takes place in the beginning of the 20th century; the times when the Dutch colonial government allied itself with the Javanese feudal aristocracy in order to contain the less prevailing division of the Javanese population. The novel's main character, a village "flower" who represents the beauty ideal of the time, is given in marriage at the age of fourteen to a noble Bendoro who is amazed by her beauty and young age. She is forced to leave behind her native village to live in the city. She commences quickly with her new life into the world of the nobility coinciding with deliberate realization that she is a merely a "practice wife," whose main purpose is to bear a child and be disposed whenever the nobleman chooses to marry a woman of his own class.

*The Girl from the Coast*, is not merely a simple story of a girl from a fishing village who is taken by a nobleman as a concubine to give birth to his child. It traces the brutality of the colonial period, the discrimination against the lower and working class people of the city and the hypocrisy of high men of religion. Although the narrative of the story is mostly uncomplicated, it is embellished with the constant words of folk songs and folklore that take the reader on a journey into the rich cultures of Indonesian people. Toer tells the story of his grandmother, who is the nameless protagonist in the novel, and through his story-telling process, he clearly Tends to expose the viciousness of Indonesian history during the Dutch colonial period as well. The girl being referred to as the girl from the coast throughout the novel, given no other name or identification other than her association with the fishing village and its poor people, portrays the misogynic society of the old Indonesian culture. This also symbolizes the identity crisis that women of the lower class suffer from in a Feudalist community.

The hypocrisy of religious men holding high positions represented by the Bendoro in the novel, is also one cruel aspect of the colonial times. The Bendoro, who is the noble and rich husband of the girl from the coast, prays five times a day and enthusiastically studies the Koran encouraging all the members of the house to do the same, but ironically treats his servants and wife with disrespect and disregard. The building of the big road in Java is also highlighted through the old maid, Mbok's stories about her ill fate when she was young. The character of Mbok represents the slaves and workers who were brutally thrashed and forced to do heavy labor during the course of which most of the laborers' husbands, wives and children

died leaving who is left alive to believe that this was the life chosen for them by God. The instability and poverty of village life, where the Dutch, the nobility, pirates, or the ocean itself are threats to the villagers lives is another aspect exposed through the novel.

The narrative, besides all the political implications, also tells a universal story of an individual who is victimized by unjust societal norms and the vindictiveness of the ones in power, constantly struggling for resilience. *The Girl from the Coast* is almost like a staged play, where the stage keeps shifting from the village to the big house in the city and then to the village, then the city again. This novel is a tremendous story of injustice and resilience that works as the perfect introduction to the works of Toer, who is not only a master storyteller, but also a representative of the rebellion against oppression and injustice in the Indonesian community.

## THE GIRL FROM THE COAST

The novel tells the story of a beautiful but poor girl from a fishing village who has nothing she holds dear to her heart except her poor and helpless parents, her memories of the fishing village where she was once free and allowed to run around and laugh freely and her love for Mbok, an old maid. She finds herself stuck in an arranged marriage where a dagger is present in place of the groom, a tradition that belittles the lower class villages as the groom belongs to a noble family and does not wish to be present there. The husband, being a rich aristocrat, is attracted by the beauty of the young girl of fourteen and takes her as his bride. However later she comes to know that she is not more than a practice wife, who was brought there to serve the noble man and bear his child. She realizes in time that there were others before her and there would be others after her. When the girl first comes to the city with her parents, she is scared and unconfident, unlike her parents who are stunned by the enormity of the house and the timid quietness that surrounds it. The girl, who is only fourteen, is referred to as 'the girl' or 'Young Mistress' throughout the narrative. She is described by the author as "a wisp of thing"(3). In the first part of the novel, the girl is portrayed as a child, an innocent young soul, free and enthusiastic with bright eyes. The author explains how the way of country-life she lived that helped her stay young and passionate until the day she left her house to become someone's wife. The girl's character changes enormously in the second part after she spends a whole year living in her husband's huge house and serving as his wife. The girl is ordered to stay silent and get used to the city ways where women do nothing but serve their men. In one part of the novel, when the girl asks her old maid about what her husband, the Bendoro, does when he is away for days in the city, she replies, "That's a man's business Young Mistress, and it would be best for you not to interfere. Women don't know about such things. Our work is here in the house. This is our territory, the area under our control"(74). Donny Syofyan, in an essay for 'The Jakarta Post', says that,

According to Pram, during these times in Indonesia's history, marriages to local women meant little to noblemen as their wives could be reserved till the time they were ready to give birth or until the man became disinterested in them and discarded them<sup>1</sup>(Syofyan). Toer was also highly critical of gender issues. According to Syofyan, Toer criticized the condition of women in Javanese society during the feudalism era in most of his works. He was exceedingly critical of the male domination in those times and his male characters in most of his works are representations of that critique. Women during the colonial period were extremely discriminated by men and the character of the Young Mistress is a good example to characterize that prejudice. Being weak and poor, she does not even dare to fight against the hurdle of enslavement and control forced upon her by the Javanese society.

The character of the Bendoro as a religious, rich, aristocrat symbolizes the hypocrisy of the religious men who pretend to be righteous and living by the book, whereas in reality, they do not practice any of the holy book's teachings. He treats his wife as a material asset, a lifeless entity whose only job is to serve and please him. He leaves her most of the times, sending days and nights away, without letting her know where he goes. His character symbolizes the hypocritical Javanese society that does not treat women with equality. For a man of his position, marriages to common women are of no significance although the marriage changes the wives' lives forever. Common women are not worth showing off as a nobleman's wives, so they are allowed to enjoy the riches of aristocracy until they bear children and are then discarded like a piece of unwanted furniture. Although the Bendoro is feared by all in the house, he is not a monstrous figure. He is just a cold, educated and rich noble man who is occasionally affectionate towards his wife, and taking advantage of his class in life. However, his marriage to the young girl, destroys her life and she is never herself again. For women of the lower class like her, such temporary marriages are life-changing procedures. The girl becomes a celebrity to the village people, who consider her and her family quite lucky to be in relation with nobility. She becomes an example of the thought that the poor can also ascend to great statures in life. After spending years as a rich man's wife who has become accustomed to wearing the finest fabrics and jewelry, when the girl returns to her village, she is looked upon with wonder by the poor villagers. They do not dare speak to her like other people of their own status and this infuriates her. In one part of the novel, when she goes with her father to see the village elder, he tells them that the root cause of all the problems in the village is all the gold she is wearing.

The character of Mbok, the old maid who takes care of the girl is of great significance. She represents the forgotten part of the community who works day and night in order to live a peaceful life, but is still demeaned by the Dutch colonizers as well as the Javanese aristocrats. People like Mbok are not considered as humans with a life, they are treated like machines who work for the upper class people. In one part of the novel, the maid tells the girl that, ". . . but just about anyone and everyone has the right to

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<sup>1</sup> This article was published in [thejakartapost.com](http://thejakartapost.com) with the title "Essay: Pramoedya's fight for women".

beat people like me"(50). This makes the girl sympathize with her even more. Mbok seems to be constantly afraid the girl might do something that would result in losing her job. She is so attached to the job, although she is not loved or respected except by the girl. The maid also represents the motherly figure that the girl lacks in the big house. When the girl requests the maid to take her jewelry in order to release herself from the fangs of poverty and despair, the maid panics and asks her to stop saying such things. She claims that she is a servant and that is her fate. She says, "If there were no servants there could be no masters"(47). Mbok and the girl's parents symbolize the distressed poor people of the lower class in a class system where the upper class and the rich aristocratic lot are the masters and they decide everyone else's fate. Mbok even seems quite convinced with this drastic division as she believes that division is important. In one part of the novel, when the girl wonders how the world would be like if everyone had a big house like the Bendoro's to live in, "About how much fair it would be if everyone had a house this large." "But then there would be no one to look after it!"(77). To conclude, Mbok believes that serving her masters in the big house is a fate decided by God and that she would be doing a sin if she would try to see herself anywhere equal to her master. She says, "I am your servant. It would be a sin against the Master, and against Allah, too, to place myself higher than the master's knees"(58). In his article, Richard Peet states,

The Marxist view is that inequality is inherent in the Capitalist mode of production. Inequality is inevitably produced during the normal operation of Capitalist economies, and cannot be eradicated without fundamentally altering the mechanisms of Capitalism (564). He further adds that in a Capitalist society, the ones with the greater power of production are always interested in keeping the social inequality preserved. Being a Feudalist society, the Indonesian communities were not much different from the Capitalists today. While in the past Feudalism involved obligations between Lords, Aristocrats and farmers and peasants, it is quite different now. Capitalism involves private ownership of production which means the power lies in the hands of those who have money or the power to direct where the money goes. It mostly refers to the economic system which is exemplified by corporate ownership of goods and production for profit. Feudalism is referred to a social-economic system where people are divided into classes; the nobles, who own most of the system, and the peasants, farmers, fishermen and workers who work for the nobility and Aristocrats. People like Mbok, the maid and the Young Mistress, who belong to a very low class in society are born only to serve the ones above them. They are controlled and put to work given tasks for the benefit of the higher few. The young girl for example, is married to the Bendoro, however she is not considered to be his wife because she does not belong to nobility. Her task is to serve the Bendoro and bear him a child only and for that she is paid wages in a different way because she is better than others of her class given her virginity, young age and untouched beauty. Mbok on the other hand, faces a lot of misery in life as she married twice and was tortured. She even lost her husband and unborn child while serving the higher class build their big fancy roads. When Mbok speaks up against the

Benodoro's nephews, she is eradicated although she speaks the truth. Later Mardinah, the other maid explains to the young girl that, "She was there to work not criticize."(156).

Another example of the lower working class in the novel is that of the carriage driver. He is a poor man with a carriage that is pulled with a horse and is content with the life he lives as long as he does not have to face the dangers of the ocean like the poor fishermen. A large part of the second half of the novel is a long conversation between the girl and the driver during her visit to her village to meet her parents. At times the driver talks about how his horse is better than him. The horse symbolizes the poor working class slaves who can do nothing but serve their masters. When she questions the leather straps covering the horse's eyes, pitying the horse for not able to see the world around it, the driver explains that it is better off like that,

"What's the use of having eyes, if they're covered like this?" the girl asked.

"When he's doing this kind of work, Ma'am, his eyes aren't much use. If you were to open the blinders, he could see what he's pulling -- tobacco! -- and then he might not want to work."(145)

The horse represents the poor workers who are blinded by a metaphoric blinder of poverty and need and so they do not care who they are working for as long as they survive and feed their children. The moment they realized how they are misused and mistreated they would revolt. The driver uses such metaphors several other times during his conversation with the girl. When she asks him if he whips his horse, he says that he thinks bad animals and bad persons are ought to be tied by their feet better than being whipped. He further explains how it is difficult though to be born as a horse or a poor man like him as they are always under somebody's whip, comparing himself to an animal. he adds, "But nobody can stay under the whip forever, there's only so much you can put up with. No matter how tired he is, even a sick tiger is going to fight if you keep prodding him. Eeyah!"(147). His reference to a sick tiger is a metaphor of revolutionary behavior. He believes that a person would resist if oppressed and pushed. He compares the poor man to a blindfolded horse first, ignorant and obedient, and later, a tiger, who would not keep calm if provoked. In either times, he compares the lower class people to animals. At the end of the journey, when the girl asks if the horse feels scared, he says, "He's afraid of nothing --not pirates, not even the devil. Says something for wearing blinders, I guess!"(148). Here again, using the blinders metaphor, he describes how the horse is brave and fearless because you cannot fear what you cannot see. Most of the poor workers are convinced that the poverty and hardship imposed upon them is their fate from God and that they cannot question it, just like the old maid Mbok, who was convinced that she had to be a servant and nothing else. She could not see the injustice practiced against her, but when she could, she was afraid for her life.

The different treatments towards people of different classes is an important aspect discussed in the second part of the novel, when the young girl, after becoming the nobleman's wife, visits her poor fishing village. She realizes that she does not belong to the village or her parental home anymore. She desperately beseeches to see love in her parents' eyes, but finds nothing as they would not dare look at her face. She is ironically treated as a legend and the villagers even write a song about her great achievement of marrying a noble man, not aware of the girl's actual position in her so-called husband's life. She is treated like a queen when she reaches the village because she is the only poor girl to marry a rich noble man, but after going through the kind of treatment she got at the Bendoro's house, the young girl did not feel happy when she was treated like that.

The Indonesia was under the direct rule of the Dutch Government, it did not witness any improvements in the social system or the Indonesian society. The Dutch constructed several fortresses and new roads for military tactical interests, which led to the death of many poor and helpless Indonesians. Roads of more than 1000 km in length were built in less than a year, to link up the eastern and the western ends of Java. These roads did not cost much financially, but took a great number of lives. In the novel, the story of Mbok, the old maid, explains this discrimination that she had to suffer while working on one of the roads. She lost everything she had, to receive in return nothing but humiliation and poverty. When the girl returns to her village, she drives past one of the roads built in those times. The driver explains how the three trees were planted there as a sign of tribute to the ones who gave their lives and lost their dear ones during the construction of the road. This again, is quite an ironic concept as the trees are going to do no good to the poor workers who lost their families, limbs and faith in the good in the world.

During her stay at the fishing village of her parents, the Young Mistress' life is threatened by assassins sent from Demak, where the rich Regent lives. A maid named Mardinah, who is a divorced young girl from Demak, is sent to accompany the girl for the purpose of getting rid of her. Mardinah's brother is later killed by the girl's father when he is found in the village disguised as a woman. The father finds out that the maid and the servants sent along with her were paid assassins who were ordered to kill the girl so that the Regent's daughter could marry the Bendoro legally. The girl never finds out about this, but she knows that everyone is trying to dispose her for their own good. As a punishment, the maid is given to marry one of the singers of the village who feels so grateful that he vows to work hard and take care of her. In the final parts of the novel, the girl is found comparing her marriage to the Bendoro who does not recognize her as wife due to her social status, to that of Mardinah and her husband Dul, who loves his wife dearly and is willing to work hard for her. She pities herself for being in a position where she owns a lot of material riches, but none of her husband's love or heart. She tells Mardinah, "I'm happy that you can accept your fate."(235), which on the contrary she could never do. She always lamented the fact that she was taken away from where she belonged to where she was never treated like she belonged. In the beginning, when

the girl first set foot in the Bendoro's house as his young bride, the maid Mbok knew what her status in the house was going to be,

Long years of experience had taught her a great deal about the differences between ordinary people and members of the upper class on this part of the coast. A man such as the Bendoro who took a common woman for a wife was not considered married, even if the couple produced a dozen children. Such marriages were "practice marriages," rehearsals for the man's real marriage, a proper marriage to a woman of the same class(76).

The Bendoro had marital relationship with the young girl although he did not really consider her his wife. When the girl overhears his conversation with the Regent's wife, she realizes that she is nobody to the Bendoro. Although being righteous and extremely religious is what the Bendoro pretends to be in front of everyone, he keeps several practice wives for pleasure and treats all under him with an unjust air. His hypocrisy is highlighted by the end of the novel, when the girl returns from her village, and he does not ask her why she had been away for so long, but is rather concerned with whether the village people need a mosque to pray and a teacher to teach them the Holy Quran. The girl is divorced soon after and thrown out of the house when she gives birth to a girl. She is treated with no more importance any further and the servants who had once treated her with high respect, throw her out on their master's command. The girl stays unnamed till the end as she represents many other poor girls in her pathetic position around that time in Indonesia. Later, after being united with her daughter, her grandson, the author of the novel, promises her to spread her story so everyone would know about her sufferings. He tells her that, "You are all the people who have ever had to fight to make this life their own."(280). Toer adds this information in an Epilogue at the end of the novel which is not a part of the original novel, in order to provide his readers with a kind of closure after the other two novels that were part of a trilogy were destroyed by the Indonesian military.

To conclude, through his novel, Pramoedya Toer brings the brutality of the Indonesian century and its colonial exploitations to the world's attention. The novel *The Girl From The Coast*, is a representation of the discrimination and hypocrisy of the upper class Javanese people of Indonesia towards the lower class, peasants, workers and fishermen. The novel also highlights the status of women in the Javanese society and the hypocrisy of the men of religion, who spread false teachings of religious faith through their prejudice against the poor. Among all of Toer's novels, *The Girl From The Coast* speaks of the life story of the writer's grandmother, explaining his relation to the upper class which was never recognized by anyone. Through her story, Toer gives us a glimpse into the early twentieth century Javanese society and the differences between the social standings that many middle class and lower class people at the time had to suffer.



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