

Deconstructing Feudalism in *Midah Si Manis Bergigi Emas* By Pramoedya Ananta Toer

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Abstract: *This article analyzes the strategies offered by Pramoedya Ananta Toer to deconstruct feudal culture in his novel, Midah Si Manis Bergigi Emas. To address the research problems, this study applies Derrida's Deconstruction theory. This research employs qualitative descriptive method rooted in Derridean deconstruction. The findings show that Pramoedya's deconstructive strategy against feudalism operates in two ways. First, character imagery where Pramoedya subverts binary oppositions by reversing traditional imagery; this is achieved by assigning fragile hierarchical traits to superior characters and granting moral nobility to marginalized subjects. Second, forgetting the feudal past as a form of deferral of meaning (différance) and the decentralization of genealogy.*

Introduction

“My world is not position and salaries. My world is this earth of mankind and its problem.” This statement comes from Minke, the main character in *Bumi Manusia* (The Earth of Mankind), one of the novels in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Buru Quartet*. This quote reflects Minke's character, who is depicted as a determined fighter for human rights during the colonial era, opposing oppression, exploitation, racism, and various injustices. This fictional character likely represents the real-world stance of his creator, Pramoedya Ananta Toer.

Pramoedya chose literature to express his nationalism, and more importantly, his deep concern for humanity. His solidarity with the people and national issues is clearly expressed in all of his literary works. This firm stance of partisanship was even politically manifested by joining the Institute for People's Culture (*LEKRA*) which developed in Indonesia in the 1950s and adhered to social realism.

For Pramoedya, literature was a medium to expose the problem that entangle humans. Because of this principle, most of his works carry the tone of resistance. He resisted oppression, racism and marginalization, whether committed by foreign colonizers or by his own people. Pramoedya cared deeply about the marginalized, especially women (Ashary.et.al, 2022).

Indeed, Pramoedya's resistance was not directed at humans. Instead, it targeted the systems, ideologies, and cultures that degraded human dignity, specifically feudalism. He viewed feudalism as a cultural system that divided society into rigid hierarchical layers of master and servant. In this system, equality had no place, and even brotherhood was non-existence – even among biological siblings. Social responsibility flowed only from the bottom up to the feudal elites. In contrast, the elites held no accountability toward their subordinates. Pramoedya stated that the feudal class was

defined by ignorance, cruelty, a lack of morality, and an inability to distinguish right from wrong (Ananta Toer, 2012).

In his view, feudalism was the root cause of the Indonesian nation's decline and vulnerability. Consequently, the nation was easily conquered by foreign colonizers. According to Pramoedya, the feudal elites, who had long served as the cultural compass for indigenous people, failed to lift burden of colonization. Western colonialism further forced the indigenous population to accept Western superiority on its own terms. Similarly, Arizal Mutahir (in Virya Singgih; 2025) argues that the strong feudal culture, combined with centuries of Dutch colonial rule, created an inferiority complex that makes Indonesians feel subordinate to dominant or powerful figures.

Pramoedya chose literature to express his critical stance on social issues, including his rejection of feudalism. Most of his works rooted in social realism, an ideology he considered ideal for society. He believed this social order honored humanity because it rejected social segregation. This stood in sharp contrast to feudalism or patriarchy, which categorized humans into rigid class systems such as aristocrat-servant, master-slave, man-woman, and rich-poor (Muzakka, 2019).

One of Pramoedya's works that embodies this resistance to feudalism is the novel *Midah, Si Manis Bergigi Emas* (abbreviated as *MSBE*), first published in 1954 by NV Nusantara, the novel tells the story of Midah, a woman, striving to gain her freedom. However, this freedom is difficult to achieve in an environment heavily steeped in feudal practices. She pays a high price for independence; though she suffers, and is marginalized, she remains strong through a bitter life.

This study is highly relevant today. Indonesia has long been independent from colonial power, however, the feudalism that Pramoedya called "Kampung culture" (GoGwilt, 2011) remains widespread. Mochtar Lubis ((Singgih, 2025) noted that although its forms have changed, feudal attitudes and relationships still live on within the Indonesian psyche. This pattern continues today, where kings have simply changed names to presidents, ministers, generals, directors general, rectors, governors, corporate executives, or plantation administrators (bbc.com/Indonesia).

Furthermore, previous studies on *Midah, Si Manis Bergigi Emas* have not specifically examined Pramoedya's strategies of resistance against the feudal system. Recent studies over the past few years have focused primarily on character traits (Septiana et. al; 2023), women's resistance to the stigma of inferiority, female character transformation, and general social criticism. Therefore this study aims to examine Pramoedya Ananta Toer's strategies of resistance as a form of deconstructing feudalism using Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction theory. This approach is highly appropriate because feudalism establishes itself through binary oppositions – such as aristocrat-servant (priyayi– abdi) – which are perfectly suited to be dismantled through deconstruction.

Theoretical Framework

Deconstruction is term popularized by Jacques Derrida, a French philosophy professor born in Algeria in 1930 (Hoed, 2007; 27). It is widely recognized as a strategy of reading various texts, including written, oral, and cultural statements that contain specific values, assumptions, ideologies, truths, and certain purposes (Gofur, 2015: 246). Initially, Derrida's idea were mostly applied in linguistics, literature, art, and cultural studies (Rusdiarti, 2007; 44).

The emergence of Derrida's deconstruction challenged traditional textual interpretation. It dismantled this tradition by opposing structuralism, a school of thought asserting that textual reality is objective, homogenous, and singular. Derrida deconstructed this belief, revealing reality to be plural, heterogeneous, and fragmented (Siregar, 2019; 66). According to Haryatmoko, this dismantling is necessary to avoid single, absolute meanings. Once an interpretation establishes itself as the sole norm, it becomes authoritarian, leading to a "terrorism of thought" where

intolerance and fanaticism gain legitimacy (Haryatmoko, 2007; 7).

Derrida criticized several foundational principles of linguistics, including the relationship between signifier and signified, *languae* and *parole*, and the historical primacy of speech over writing. Structuralism, pioneered by Ferdinand de Saussure, posits that language is a system of signs whose meanings are conventionally understood by its users. This sign system of signs consists of two inseparable elements: the signifier (*signifiant*) and the signified (*signifié*) (Hoed, 2007; 18, Basis, Siregar, 2019; 67). These signs form a syntagmatic chain, meaning they exist in a shared sequence or a relationship of co-presence (*relation de praesentia*) (Hoed, 2007; 18). Traditionally, the connection between the signifier and the signified was viewed as fixed and absolute (Siregar, 2019; 68, Abdul Gofur, 2015; 247).

Derrida built his theory upon Saussure's concept of the sign but argued that the relationship between signifier and signified is neither static nor absolute. In practice, this relation can be "deferred" to create new connections. Therefore, the meaning of a sign is not derived solely from fixed different between signs. Instead, it changes based on the user's intent, the sign itself, space and time.

Furthermore, Derrida encourages us to consciously practice this deferral as an act of critical thinking. Meaning-making does not happen simply through opposition or differentiation, but because the connection between the signifier and the signified is deferred to uncover new meanings. This process of creating new relationships is known as deconstruction, and the resulting flux is called *différance* (Hoed, 2007; 29). In this context, Derrida emphasizes that meaning is never finalized in a single instance; it shifts across different spaces and times (Hoed, 2007; 29).

Beyond being a sign system, language is also a social phenomenon known as *langage*. Saussure divided *langage* into two levels: *langue* (abstract rule and conventions) and *parole* (the actual practice of speech within society) (Hoed, 2007; 19, Lubis in Siregar 2014:54). Because Saussure viewed language as a socially defined social system, he argued that *langue* governs *parole*. Individual speech (*parole*) must follow social rule (*langue*). Consequently, structuralism focuses primarily on *langue*, the objective, homogenous, and standardized rule; rather than *parole*, which is subjective, unconventional, and heterogeneous (Siregar, 2014:54).

Derrida, however, rejected this hierarchy. He argued that language practitioners can eventually reshape the rules of language (*langue*) through active communication (*parole*) (Hoed, 2007;29). Thus, textual meaning is not limited by social convention; it can also be driven by the individual. This opens the door for new interpretations, as each person understands a text based on their unique background.

Derrida also criticized structuralism's privileging of speech over writing (phonocentrism), which assumes that written language is merely derivative of spoken language. Derrida argued the opposite: language originates in writing. Writing is the ultimate fulfillment of language because it fully occupies physical space. It exists concretely on a page rather than just in the human mind. Once words are on a page, writing detaches from the author and becomes independent. Upon being read, it immediately opens itself up to the reader's interpretation (Hoed, 2007; 27).

Based on this review, the core essence of Derridean deconstruction is liberation. Derrida opens up space for interpreting signifier and signified. He encourages readers to break free from conventional meanings by not immediately accepting the visible signifiers in a text. Instead, readers should defer meaning to uncover alternative possibilities embedded within the signs that construct the text.

Another form of liberation offered by deconstruction is freedom from rigid, objective, and closed rules. Derrida argues that interpretation should be grounded in the subjective nature of *parole*. This allows a single text to generate diverse meanings, as it is no longer restricted by rigid

norm but is shaped by the interpreter, time, and space.

The third liberation frees written language from the shadow of speech. Derrida elevates writing to the primary position previously held by speech basing his argument on the interpretive process. Spoken language limits new meanings because it remains under the speaker's immediate control. In contrast, written language is released by the author the moment it is transformed into text. At this stage, the text becomes independent, free from the author's intervention, and open to free interpretation by readers.

In this study, the feudal system is viewed as a master text operating on deeply entrenched binary oppositions, such as Aristocrat vs. Servant (Priyayi vs. Abdi), Pure vs. Sinner, and man vs. woman. Through the lens of Derridean deconstruction, these binary opposition are seen as unstable rather than absolute. This article employs a deconstructive reading strategy to trace how Pramoedya's text intentionally subverts these hierarchies, differs their conventional meanings and dismantles the long-established centers of feudal authority.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method, specifically a literary research approach which is commonly used to analyze literary texts. As a library based study, the data were gathered from two types of sources: primary and secondary. The primary data source is *Midah Si Manis Bergigi Emas* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, which was first published in 1954 by NV Nusantara and has since been reprinted multiple times by Lentera Dipantara. The data for this research were extracted from the fourth printing, published in March 2009. Additionally to support the primary data and enrich the discussion surrounding the research issues, secondary data sources such as academic journals, magazines, and books were utilized.

The research was conducted in several stages. First, the researchers selected the research topic, read the novel thoroughly, and gathered raw data from the text. Second, the research problems were formulated, and relevant secondary data were collected to support the analysis. Third, the study applied Jacques Derrida's deconstruction theory along with supporting sources to address the research problems. Fourth, the findings were presented, followed by the conclusion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the study of the novel *Midah, Si Manis Bergigi Emas* (MSBE), the deconstruction of the feudal system is executed through two primary methods: character imagery and the act of forgetting. Below is a comprehensive analysis of the forms of deconstruction offered by Pramoedya Ananta Toer through the characters in his novel.

Character Imagery

Character imagery is a method utilized by Pramoedya Ananta Toer as a form of deconstruction against feudalism. Pramoedya employs imagery as a strategy to dismantle the rigid binary oppositions within feudal society. Feudal culture divides society into a class system where the upper class represented in this novel by Hadji Abdul and Ahmad, serves as the pure, sacred, and superior "center." Conversely, women and the working class (Midah, Riah) are categorized as the lower class, rendering them marginalized and inferior subjects. Pramoedya deconstructs this social order by completely reversing its hierarchy.

The characters who carry positive imagery in the novel are predominantly female; Midah, Riah and Hadji Abdul's wife. Midah's mother is depicted as a loyal and obedient wife who remains responsible for her children. She constantly defers to her husband's will, fulfilling his every demand. Concurrently, she is a resilient and accountable mother; when her daughter decides to leave home, she searches for her and courageously welcomes her back when Midah severe adversity.

Riah is a maid working for Hadji Abdul's family who proves to be loyal and responsible in performing her duties. She treats Midah exceptionally well, loving her like her own child. Due to this close bond, she is frequently scolded by her employer, who suspects her of bad influence or teaching improper things to Midah. Riah's kindness remains unchanged even after she leaves her employment. She continues to care for and love Midah, becoming the first person Midah turns to when deciding to leave her husband. It is Riah who consistently advises Midah to return to her parents' house to escape her suffering, and she even tracks Midah down later just to ensure that her former employer's daughter is safe and well.

Marginalized individuals like Midah's mother and Riah hold a special place in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's vision. They are the people who lack the freedom to determine their own lives due to their deep compliance with tradition, always ready to execute whatever is demanded by those who hold power over them. Despite this limitation, they possess noble hearts and show genuine empathy for others. Pramoedya highlights the nature of these working class figures through the following quote: "A person like Riah, whose only capital is her own honesty, always tries to do good for her people" (*Midah Si Manis Bergigi Emas* /MSBE 24).

The protagonist of this novel, Midah, is another pivotal female character. Midah is depicted as a woman who fights resiliently to achieve success independently. However, her struggle to reach her goals is fraught with hardship; she must endure various bitter events that cause her both physical and psychological trauma. Midah's first dark experience occurs within her own home when her father slaps her for playing kroncong music. Beyond the physical abuse, her favorite kroncong vinyl records are ruthlessly destroyed by her father.

This bitter experience does more than leave a deep psychological scar; it marks the beginning of a new life trajectory for Midah. The sweetness of life driven by an intimate relationship between father and child ends abruptly due to this structural 'fracture' replaced by a succession of traumatic events. However, these painful encounters simultaneously transform her into a powerful individual capable of braving the storm of life.

Midah courageously decides to leave the husband chosen by her father, Hadji Terbus, who already has many wives and treats her arbitrarily. She chooses to abandon her husband while she is pregnant, leaving behind the people who legally held responsibility over her. Instead, she chooses to support herself and her unborn child alone. Armed with her physical beauty and singing talents, Midah begins to build a career as a kroncong singer, a profession she could never have pursued had she remain under her father's roof.

Initially, she is accepted as a singer by a group of street kroncong musicians. In this new environment, Midah faces further abusive treatment, being ridiculed by her female peers and continuously harassed by the men. Midah completely ignores their disruptions to focus on her work, earning a living for herself and her unborn child. She genuinely enjoys her job and finds the autonomy she has been searching for, "an indescribable excitement" (MSBE 36)

However, this newly found peace of mind does not last long. She is dismissed from the group because she can no longer focus solely on singing; her attention becomes divided after the birth of her child. Undeterred, Midah rises again to pursue her singing career, deciding to go solo. At this juncture, Midah meets Ahmad, a policeman and artist who had previously helped her when she was part of the kroncong group led by Rois. Ahmad trains Midah in vocal skills and helps her become a radio singer. She eventually falls in love with Ahmad, and becomes pregnant, but Ahmad refuses to acknowledge the child. Once again, she experiences severe trauma from being deeply hurt by someone she truly trusted and loved.

Her disappointment in Ahmad does not make her collapse; instead she uses it to advance her career further. She expands her repertoire from singing to the film industry, becoming highly

successful and famous. Through this path, she meets many men who eventually drag her into the world of prostitution.

The career choices Midah makes, as a singer, an actress, and particularly as a commercial worker, stand in a direct opposition to her father's wishes and general societal expectation, especially given her prestigious family background. Consequently, Midah would normally be assigned a deeply negative social stigma. Yet, reality proves otherwise; Pramoedya portrays Midah in a highly positive light. She is presented as a strong, resilient, and tested woman facing every problem head-on. She continues to rise against life's hardship until she ultimately achieves success. She succeeds in her career, becomes a self-reliant individual, and most importantly, succeeds in freeing herself the grip of feudalism that thrives within formal institution ranging from the smallest unit, the family, to the largest, namely government and religious institution.

Conversely, negative imagery is attached to those characters, both men and women, who are highly respected in the eyes of society because they hold institutional power and the ability to control the others through their positions or wealth. The characters who receive negative imagery in the novel include Hadji Abdul, Ahmad, the midwives and the landlady.

The landlady is a figure who is initially kind to Midah when Midah is still in a relationship with Ahmad and before Midah's background is fully clear to her. The change in the landlady's attitude occurs when she discovers that Midah has decided to leave Ahmad because she refuses to acknowledge the child. Feeling that her household has been stained by Midah's presence, the landlady completely ignores Midah's suffering. Heartlessly, she evicts Midah from her house when Midah is at her lowest point.

Inhumane characteristics are also assigned to the midwives. They do not provide proper care to Midah simply because she refuses to disclose her husband's name. This mistreatment extends not only to Midah but also to her newborn child. The midwives leave the baby lying naked without any warm blankets or wrappings. In addition to the midwives, the clinic staff also treat her poorly, maintaining a "sour face and receiving her with coldness" (MSBE, 55).

Another character depicted negatively is Ahmad. He is a police officer and an artist who trains Midah in vocal techniques and helps her become a radio singer. They fall in love, and Midah eventually becomes pregnant. However, when asked to acknowledge the child, Ahmad refuses. He declines out of fear of his parents, dreading how they would react if they discovered he had fallen in love with a woman who was previously married and already had a child. Ahmad is described as a "coward who lack even the lightest bit of courage" (MSBE, 110).

The primary male character portrayed negatively by the author is Hadji Abdul. He possesses numerous negative traits; he is short-tempered, craves praise for his success and views himself as the most pious and righteous person in the eyes of God. Driven by personal ambition, he does not hesitate to sacrifice his daughter, his family, and those under his authority. However, his aggressive temperament is not a true representation of his inner self. He becomes bad-tempered only because the power he wields and the weight of tradition. In reality, Hadji Abdul is a weak individual who crumbles when facing challenges and lacks any sense of responsibility for his mistakes. All he can do is passively resign himself to fate and surrender to God through his prayers.

The character traits of upper-class figures like Hadji Abdul, who cannot face challenges, combined with the cowardice in Ahmad, demonstrate an instability of the signifier. Characters who are structurally positioned as signifiers of authority is merely an illusion and has been successfully dismantled by the text.

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Forgetting

Another form of resistance found in the novel *Midah Si Manis Bergigi Emas* is the act of forgetting or liberating oneself from the feudal environment. As Pramoedya narrates, after enduring harsh treatment from both her father and her husband, Midah decides to leave them behind. By doing so, she frees herself from potential future abuse and detaches from the formalities of family life that demand absolute obedience as a wife and a daughter. When fleeing her husband's house, she deliberately avoids returning to her parents' home, the very place where she first experienced abuse. Instead, she chooses to go to the house of Riah, her caregiver. Even when Riah urges her to return to her parents, Midah firmly refuses. Ultimately, Midah also chooses not to stay long at Riah's house because she is constantly pressured to remember her parents.

Midah practices this act of forgetting once again when facing administrative issues at the hospital while about to give birth. When the hospital staff asks her to fill out her husband's personal information, she avoids identifying the father of her child. She refuses to recall any name other than her own. When questioned, she replies "Midah is my name. Only that. The rest, I do not know" (MSBE; 51).

This action by Midah represents a radical deconstruction of feudal patriarchal logocentrism. Within a feudal system, a woman's identity is always constructed as dependent on a man's name (either the father of the husband) as the center of her existential truth. By consciously claiming forgetfulness, Midah exercises the deferral of meaning (*différance*). She breaks her dependence on the chain of feudal signifiers to give birth to a new, independent sense of self.

Midah's struggle to forget her bitter experiences is not entirely successful, as she must constantly confront a system that has infected every place she visits. She continuously moves from one location to another, yet she repeatedly encounters the same mistreatment she seeks to escape. However, even though her success is limited, her courage to momentarily forget her past and block out everything that oppresses her allows her to find her own free self. She gains the autonomy to define her own life; a life completely different from the one envisioned by her father, her husband, and society at large.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the novel *Midah Si Manis Bergigi Emas*, it is clear that Pramoedya Ananta Toer expresses his resistance to feudalism. He views feudalism as a 'kampung' culture that severely degrades human dignity due to its inherent master-servant dynamic. The author's resistance is demonstrated through his fictional characters; those who are marginalized in society are elevated, while those considered superior and dominant are dismantled.

Pramoedya offers two main strategies of resistance, the first is character imagery. This imagery is applied to all characters. Those representing marginalized groups are given positive traits, with Midah being the most prominent example. She is depicted as a resilient and determined individual who stands strong against all forms of dominance and independently achieves success. Conversely, characters representing the supposedly superior class are undermined by being assigned negative traits; they are portrayed as short-tempered, cowardly, inhumane and weak.

Using imagery as a tool for resistance is an effective way to shape how people perceive a particular subject or object. Through constant exposure, it is highly possible to influence people's attitudes and spark action. This method proved effective when used by the Dutch during colonial era. The colonizers continuously built stereotypes of the colonized as uneducated, primitive, and childish, which ultimately created an inferiority complex and made the indigenous people view the colonizers as a superior race.

The second form of resistance found in the novel is the act of forgetting or liberating oneself

from feudalism. Pramoedya realizes that forgetting or breaking free from feudalistic practices is difficult because these behaviors have become deeply embedded in Indonesian culture and have spread across various social spheres. Nevertheless, the struggle must continue because it is only through freedom that an individual can discover their true identity.

The deconstruction of feudalism is necessary not only because it degrades human status, but also it creates a closed system where power is concentrated within specific groups, particularly aristocrats or landowners. Social relations in this system are hierarchical and rigid, offering very limited social mobility. Law, education, and information are controlled by the elite, leading to widespread injustice and inequality, rather than granting everyone the freedom to determine their own social status and destiny.

Overall, the deconstruction in feudalism in *Midah Si Manis Bergigi Emas* does not merely dismantle social structures at a thematic level; it also constructs the linguistic certainty and moral convention that protect it. Through the strategy of reversing binary oppositions in character imagery and disrupting genealogical chains through the act of forgetting, Pramoedya successfully reveals that feudalism is a fragile cultural system, full of internal contradictions, which no longer holds absolute legitimacy to confine human freedom.

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