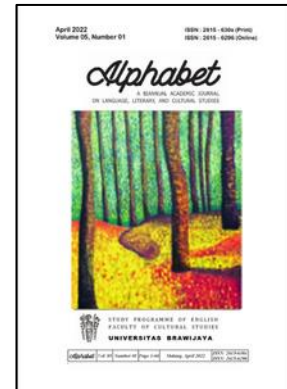


# ALPHABET

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## How the Subaltern Speaks in Iksaka Banu's “Di Ujung Belati” : A Postcolonial Study

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Alphabet / Volume 05 / Number 01 / April 2022, pp. 47-54  
doi: 10.21776/ub.alphabet.2022.05.01.05, Published online: April 2022

### How to cite this article :

Safitri, F. D., Wulandari, I., and Hanifah, H. N. (2022). How the Subaltern speaks in Iksaka Banu's Di Ujung Belati: A postcolonial study. *Alphabet*, 05(01), 47-54. doi: 10.21776/ub.alphabet.2022.05.01.05

# How the Subaltern Speaks in Iksaka Banu's "Di Ujung Belati" : A Postcolonial Study

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Program of English, Faculty of  
Cultural Studies, Universitas  
Brawijaya  
ISSN: 2615-630x (print)  
2615-6296 (online)  
Vol. 05, No. 01

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## Abstract

Iksaka Banu's "Di Ujung Belati" is a short story set in the colonial era. The social class system established by the Dutch government at that time makes the natives difficult to speak in various spheres of life. In this study, the short story was discussed using the perspective of subalternity introduced by Spivak. The method used was the literature review method. Based on the discussion, it can be seen that the Dutch put the natives in a subaltern position in terms of gender, economy, and culture. The oppression perceived by the subaltern gives rise to resistance in the form of rebellion and betrayal towards the Dutch government. That rebellion and betrayal is the way the subaltern speaks. Even though they have succeeded in overthrowing the Dutch, the natives are under the domination of another Western power, which is Britain. This shows that the natives are not completely successful in fighting Western hegemony. In relation to the current context of globalization, "Di Ujung Belati" short story can be a form of raising public awareness of the existence of neocolonialism after colonialism is abolished.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Spivak, Natives, The Dutch, *Di Ujung Belati*

"Di Ujung Belati" short story, hereinafter referred to as DUB, is one of Iksaka Banu's literary works which is included in "Semua untuk Hindia" short story anthology. Similar to Iksaka Banu's other works, this short story is set in the colonial period. The DUB short story tells the story of a Dutch officer named Lieutenant Fabian Grijs. He is a military member who is assigned to the Dutch East Indies during the colonial period.

Grijs's life in the Dutch East Indies made him interact a lot with Eastern culture and people. Grijs is a Westerner who thinks that the colonizers should not demean their position in front of the East so that they can still be respected by the natives. This makes

Grijs often think negatively about natives, including when his subordinate, Sterk, takes a mistress from among the native women.

Grijs's hatred for the natives started when there was a rebellion during the road construction in Kwitang. Grijs was angry that the initiator of the rebellion was Sabeni, a native whom he believed served as the foreman on the project. To punish Sabeni, Grijs gouged out one of Sabeni's eyes so that the incident made him disabled. Three years later, Grijs's armies were attacked by British armies. In that state of chaos, there was someone who helped Grijs from the attack. The person was none other than Sabeni, the one who had been injured once by Grijs.

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Iksaka Banu used Grij's point of view in presenting the story. The cynicism of Grij toward the natives shows his superiority that represents the Westerners toward the Dutch East Indies society. According to Said (2010), the superiority of the West to the East is a form of orientalism. An understanding of orientalism then brought about the theory of postcolonialism (Ratna, 2008). The postcolonialism study then developed with the emergence of many pioneers, one of which was Spivak who was a figure in subaltern collective studies. The subaltern study proposed by Spivak focused on the conditions of minority groups, rebels, and marginalized groups (Ratna, 2008).

The subaltern study group in India tried to answer the possibility of the subaltern to speak. They looked back at the colonial history of India which shows the existence of a social class hierarchy in society. The first group is occupied by the dominant foreign group. The second group is occupied by the dominant native people around the world. The third group is occupied by local and regional natives. The last group is occupied by the people or the subaltern (Spivak, 1988).

"Semua untuk Hindia" short story anthology is an anthology that is often discussed from a postcolonial perspective. Ahmad (2016) discussed the hybridity of Dutch figures in the short story anthology. In terms of feminism, Sekarningrum (2016) also examined forms of colonial resistance against patriarchy. In this study, Iksaka Banu's DUB short story was analyzed using the subalternity perspective proposed by Spivak. This paper focused on the discussion of (1) the native as subalterns in the DUB short story, (2) how the subaltern speaks, and (3) the relationship between the DUB short story and the context of the era of globalization.

The concept of subaltern was first introduced by Antonio Gramsci when talking about the inferior group with the hegemony of power (Udasromo, 2010). Spivak then established this idea in the realm of postcolonialism. According to Spivak (as cited

in Bahardur, 2017), the effects of colonialism still create minority groups who do not have access to express their opinions. Subaltern groups are always underestimated in various spheres of life, so that their presence is dominated by the ruling group.

Subalternity can be seen in several aspects of life, for example, economic, ideological, and cultural aspects. In these aspects of life, the subaltern is always dominated by upper-class groups who consider their life to have a high degree. Therefore, Spivak (1985) questions the possibility of the subaltern to speak in capitalist life and under the auspices of imperialism.

Initially, Spivak (as cited in Morton, 2005) rejected the idea that the subaltern can speak. This is based on the results of Spivak's analysis of the suicide case of an Indian woman named Bhubhaneswari because she felt that she had failed to fight the invaders. Because the woman's actions cannot be understood as speech acts (cannot be heard or read) in the public code, Spivak argued that the subaltern is not able to speak. However, due to criticism from Parry and Moore-Gilbert later regarding this understanding, Spivak admitted that the subaltern is able to speak out in a way that often opposes or contradicts dominant authority (Morton, 2005).

According to Faruk (2007), using Spivak's understanding, it does not rule out the possibility of resistance to power by subalterns. In the face of perceived discrimination, Spivak argues that subalterns have the power to equal or fight against the rulers or upper-class society (as cited in Lestari, 2018).

## METHOD

This study was qualitative research that focused on description. Qualitative research is research that makes use of interpretive methods as a whole by presenting them in the form of descriptions (Ratna, 2011). According to Faruk (2020), material objects are objects that are the target of the study, so the material object in this study was the DUB short story

by Iksaka Banu, published in 2014 by the KPG Publisher. Meanwhile, the formal object as a point of view in this study used the postcolonial perspective proposed by Gayatri Spivak. The data collection method was carried out using the literature review method. The data collection process was qualitative and was taken from parts of the text describing the subaltern described by the characters in the DUB short story. The short story as an object of the story is expected to describe the way the subaltern speaks.

The data collection technique in the study was carried out in several steps. First, reading the entire DUB short story. Second, understanding the contents of the short story. Third, identifying problems in the DUB short story. Fourth, classifying the data related to subalternity in categorizing the collected data. The data analysis technique used included, first, the researcher identified and analyzed the data according to Gayatri Spivak's perspective. Second, concluding the findings. Third, writing a research report.

## DISCUSSION

### Natives as Subaltern in "Di Ujung Belati" Short Story

In this section, the aspects of life that make a group become subaltern will be analyzed. This process of domination is carried out by assuming that Western life is of higher value than that of the East. Therefore, the colonizers always look down on the natives.

In the DUB short story, the first subaltern form is shown by the gender discrimination experienced by Sterk's wife. Sterk considers his wife as a sexual object who serves only to complement his life. This is in line with Spivak's opinion about women who are only complementary (Setiawan, 2018). In the dialogue, Sterk also insults Dutch women.

*"Ya. Gadis kemayoran. Manis," Sterk meringis, memamerkan sepasang gigi emasnya. "Tak pernah tabu nama aslinya. Yang jelas, Januari kemarin ia resmi menjadi Johanna Maria Krets setelah melahirkan anakku."*

*"Krets? Ah ya, tentu saja. Pembalikan namamu, bukan?" Aku mengangguk paham. "Kau tergila-gila padanya?"*

*"Letnan, ia mahir bercinta dan tidak rewel seperti para betina palsu dari Holland itu," Sterk mendengus. (Banu, 2014: 94)*

*"Yes. The girl of Kemayoran. Sweet," Sterk grimaced, showing off his pair of gold teeth. "I've never got to know her real name. The truth is, she officially became Johanna Maria Krets last January after giving birth to my child."*

*"Krets? Well, yes, of course. That's the reversal of your name, right?" I nodded in understanding. "Are you crazy about her?"*

*"Lieutenant, she's good at making love and not fussy like those fake sluts from Holland," Sterk snorted. (Banu, 2014: 94)*

Sterk married his wife because she can fulfill his sexual needs so well. The dialogue between Sterk and Grijs shows that they regard women only as objects, not subjects in life. Not only to natives, but Sterk also verbally abuses Dutch women by calling them 'Dutch sluts.' 'Slut' is a diction that is often used to refer to the sexual intercourse of those like an animal.

The next subaltern is shown in terms of tradition. Grijs considers the Western tradition to be superior to that of the East. Grijs rejects the mixing of Western and Eastern traditions because he thinks it will only demean Western people. In the dialogue, it is also emphasized that it is the Western nation that makes the East more civilized.

*"Sersan, orang Inggris memang congkak, tetapi kurasa mereka benar. Dengan menjaga kemurnian tradisi Barat yang tinggi, penduduk asli akan menaruh hormat pada kita. Lihat pasukan Inggris. Berapa banyak prajurit Eropa di sana? Hanya sepertiga. Sisanya adalah laskar Bengal dan Madras dari India, yang setia kepada Raja Inggris," kataku. "Jadi, bukan kita yang turun, merekalah yang*

*perlahan kita naikkan derajatnya menjadi bangsa beradab.” (Banu, 2014: 94-96)*

“Sergeant, the British are snobby, but I think they’re right. By preserving the high purity of Western traditions, the natives will respect us. Look at British armies. How many European armies are there? Only a third. The rests are Indian Bengal and Madras, who are loyal to the King of England,” I said. “So, we are not the ones who demean, they are the ones that we slowly raise to become a civilized nation.” (Banu, 2014: 94-96)

Grijs is a true supporter of Western traditions. According to him, Eastern nations are required to be loyal to Western nations. Grijs also shows his admiration for the British armies who are highly respected by the Indian population. The same as the orientalist view in general, Grijs considers the Western nation to be responsible for civilizing the East. This is a form of domination over the East or to make the traditions of the East the subaltern.

The culture of chewing betel leaf which is often practiced by the natives is also considered substandard. According to Grijs, the *sarong* dress and red mouth because of chewing betel leaf ruin the grandeur of an event. Grijs compares it to the petticoat dress commonly worn by Dutch women.

*Sterk ingin mengatakan sesuatu, namun aku terus bicara: “Hal lain, coba katakan, di mana keagungan sebuah pesta dansa, pertunjukan opera, atau ibadat gereja bila wanitamu datang dengan sarung sebagai pengganti petticoat, sementara dari mulut mereka mengalir cairan merah seperti ini?” kusenggol bibir Sterk dengan telunjuk kanan. Pria itu menepis tanganku. (Banu, 2014: 96)*

Sterk wanted to say something, but I kept on talking: “Another thing, let’s say, where is the grandeur of a dance party, opera performance, or church service when your women come in *sarongs* instead of petticoats, while from their mouths flowing red liquid like this?” I nudged Sterk’s lips with my right

forefinger. The man brushed aside my hand. (Banu, 2014: 96)

Grijs eliminates the natives in social events. According to him, the natives who have the cultures in which they often wear a *sarong* and chew betel leaf are not appropriate to attend parties, performances, and church services. The exclusion of the natives from social associations is a subalternity form in terms of culture.

During the colonial period, the natives do not have rights to the land they were born in. Economically, they are indeed enslaved by the colonialists. A number of forced-labor make them suffer. Iksaka Banu told the part of road construction led by Daendels. At that time, coolies whose work does not reach the target will be punished by the supervisor who is definitely a Dutchman.

*Maka lepas tengah hari, atas perintah Majoor Ijzerhard, para serdadu diturunkan. Cambuk bermata sembilu segera berputar-putar mencari korban. Dalam tempo singkat satu kilo meter jalan rampung dipadatkan. (Banu, 2014: 98).*

So, in the afternoon, on the orders of Majoor Ijzerhard, the armies were deployed. The whip with the eyes of pain immediately circled in search of victims. In a short time, one kilometer of the road was compacted. (Banu, 2014: 98).

In the above quotation, it can be seen that economically, the natives as landowners do not have an opportunity to speak. They are disciplined by the colonials in their work activities. The natives also do not have the right to speak out regarding wages and work procedures. All matters relating to economic aspects have been regulated by the Dutch party. This shows that natives are economically positioned in subalternity.

Grijs further emphasized the Dutch party’s power over the natives when he shows his disappointment with a character named Sabeni. Grijs thought that Sabeni should not have followed the rebellion of the coolies

because it is the Dutch who provides Sabeni with a comfortable life. Grijs even calls Sabeni's life trash.

*"Sabeni," desisku dalam bahasa Melayu. Kuangkat kau dari tumpukan sampah, kusantuni keluargamu, kubolehkan kau menarik upeti. Inikah ucapan terima kasihmu? Begitu sulitkah untuk setia? Sadarkah kau, hidupmu ada di tanganku? Di ujung belati ini?"* (Banu, 2014: 98)

"Sabeni," I hissed in Malay. "I lifted you out from the pile of trash, I supported your family, I allowed you to withdraw the tribute. Is this your response of gratitude? Is it so hard to be loyal? Do you realize, your life is in my hands? At the end of this dagger?" (Banu, 2014: 98)

Based on an excerpt of the dialogue by Grijs, Sabeni has become a party that cannot speak for his fate. He is considered to have no share in his own life. The comfort that Sabeni and her family received is only a form of compassion from the Dutch. This fact makes the colonial government demand that Sabeni obey the Dutch. In this case, Sabeni is asked to prioritize the interests of the colonial party over the interests of the natives.

Based on the evidence above, the natives have become a subaltern in colonial life. The natives are dominated by a greater power, which is the Dutch. The natives cannot speak out about their lives. All aspects of life are arranged by the Dutch so that the Dutch can easily get rid of things that they think are unsuitable or primitive. Based on the explanation above, it can be clearly seen that the subalternity is shown in terms of gender, culture, and economy. In these three aspects, the Dutch consider them to be the ones who are superior.

### **Rebellion and Betrayal of the Natives as a Way the Subaltern Speaks**

In the previous section, it has been discussed that the natives are the subalterns during the colonial period. Based on her study

of the suicide of an Indian woman as a form of resistance against the invaders, Spivak admitted that the subaltern can speak even though it is not through speech acts that can be heard or read (Morton, 2005).

In the DUB short story, the resistance of the subaltern is carried out by Sabeni. In the story, it is told that Sabeni is the chief foreman of the road construction project supervised by Daendels. The rebellion by the coolies is allegedly instigated by Sabeni as the head of the foreman.

*"Libat," Marsekal menoleh. Kuikuti arah dagunya. Di depan barisan kuli dan serdadu berdiri Sabeni, kepala mandor, dengan tangan terikat ke belakang. Wajahnya lebam. Di ujung kakinya, terbaring sekitar dua puluh mayat kuli.*

*"Si penghasut," kata Marsekal sambil melemparkan sebilah belati kepadaku. "Buatlah pelajaran yang sulit dilupakan semua yang ada di sini, agar mereka menghormati orang yang sudah memberi mereka hidup."* (Banu, 2014: 99)

"Look," Marshal turned his head. I followed the direction of his chin. In front of the line of the coolies and armies, there stood Sabeni, the chief foreman, his hands tied behind his back. His face is bruised. At his feet, about twenty corpses of coolies lied down.

"The instigator," said Marshal, throwing a dagger at me. "Make a lesson that is hard to forget for all the people here, so that they respect the person who provided them life." (Banu, 2014: 99)

Based on information stated by Marshal Daendels, Grijs learns that Sabeni is the mastermind behind the rebellion by the coolies. Sabeni is a native who is the chief foreman of the project. Because of his actions, which instigated the coolies to fight when they are whipped, Sabeni received punishment from Grijs. Grijs thinks that he is betrayed because he has provided Sabeni with a good life.

To teach the other natives a lesson not to rebel, Grijs gouges out one of Sabeni's eyes. This makes Sabeni's eye disabled. Three years later, Sabeni returns to Grijs's life as Sapoy army. Sapoy army is a British army consisting of young men from the colonies.

In this short story, the British armies become the enemy of the Netherlands in seizing the colonies in the Dutch East Indies. Grijs must arrange a strategy to defeat the British armies that invade his territory. However, in the end, Grijs's armies are overthrown by the British army attack.

Based on this story, it can be seen that Sabeni has fought against the Dutch twice. The first is when he instigates the coolies to rebel and the second is when he helps the British army attacks the territory of the Dutch army. This resistance can be analyzed as a subaltern way of speaking. Sabeni tries to convey his hurt by making fun of Grijs.

*"Tuan, sadarkah kau bahwa hidupmu ada di tanganku? Di ujung belati ini?" terdengar suaranya. Berat dan datar. Suara yang pernah akrab di telingaku.*

*"Sabeni?"*

...

*Dalam gelap, terasa olehku bahwa matanya yang tinggal satu menatap lurus kepadaku, mengiringi suaranya yang berat dan datar, "Terima kasih telah mengangkatku dari sampah." (Banu, 2014: 99)*

"Sir, do you realize that your life is in my hands? At the end of this dagger?" came his voice. Heavy and flat. The voice that was once familiar to my ears.

"Sabeni?"

...

In the dark, it seemed to me that his only one eye was staring straight at me, accompanying his heavy, flat voice, "Thank you for lifting me out of the trash." (Banu, 2014: 99)

Sabeni repeats the sentence that Grijs once uttered when punishing him. During this

event, Sabeni succeeds in dominating Grijs. He can silence Grijs and speak back about his hatred for Grijs.

Sabeni also thanks Grijs for 'lifting him out from the trash'. This can mean two things. Firstly, Sabeni may be true in saying his gratitude to Grijs for lifting him out from the life of the native that is full of suffering. Secondly, however, the expression of gratitude uttered by Sabeni can also be meaningful because Sabeni feels that life under Dutch rule is a trash-like life. Sabeni is grateful that Grijs punished him at that time and made him into the British army.

Although Sabeni is considered successful in fighting against the ruling government, which is the Dutch government, Sabeni fails to resist global hegemony. The fall of the Dutch army in the "Di Ujung Belati" short story strengthens another Western power, which is Britain. This meant that Sabeni and other natives are still dominated by Western powers.

### **"Di Ujung Belati" Short Story as a Neocolonialism Awareness Instigator**

Iksaka Banu is an author of historical literary works. His works tell a lot about the Dutch colonial period in Indonesia. Iksaka Banu was born in 1964. This indicates that he never experienced the colonial period directly.

Ratna (2008) mentioned several things regarding the importance of post-colonialism to be studied even after colonialization is abolished. According to her, postcolonialism is closely related to nationalism. Postcolonialism is also able to raise awareness that colonialism is not merely physical, but also psychological. By studying postcolonialism, awareness to combat imperialism, orientalism, racism, and various forms of hegemony can be formed. These aspects could be the reasons for choosing the colonial theme in Iksaka Banu's works.

Spivak's (1988) understanding of the subaltern began with her critical view of the West's radical criticism of imperialism which

ultimately strengthened the Western view as a subject. Spivak as an Eastern intellectual showed her concern about the emergence of neocolonialism in the form of new discourses that continue to strengthen the position of the West and marginalize the East. This concern demands a critical reading of the postcolonial texts.

In reading the DUB short story as postcolonial texts, critical reading is also required. Although not a Western author, Iksaka Banu is a writer who lives in a modernization era dominated by Western culture. The depiction of the native subaltern and Dutch colonial in the DUB short story is an illustration of the current neocolonialism.

In both the colonial and independent eras as today, awareness is the most important thing that people must have. Even though colonialism is over, Western hegemony over third world countries continues to be operated in other forms. The ending of the story which shows that the fall of the Dutch government is replaced by the British government can be interpreted that the East, especially Indonesia, will never be inseparable from Western power.

The DUB short story can become texts that are expected to raise awareness of the existence of neocolonialism. In this globalization era, it is expected that the Indonesian people will no longer be a voiceless subaltern. An awareness of a new form of colonialism must be established so that colonial history will not be repeated. The Indonesian people must be able to speak about their identity and no longer allow other nations to become representatives of their own nations.

## CONCLUSION

From the point of view of Grijs in the DUB short story, it can be seen that the natives are the subaltern in the social class of the Dutch East Indies society. The subaltern is manifested by looking down on the natives and considering the value of Western life to be superior. The subalternity form appears in the

aspects of gender, economy, and culture. Because the Dutch assumed that they are better in these aspects of life, they make the natives their objects and do not allow them to speak. They even regulate the natives in various aspects of life.

The Dutch colonial oppression of the natives leads to resistance from the subaltern. The resistance is carried out by rebelling and betraying the Dutch government. The native rebels and becomes British armies to rule out the Dutch from the land of the Dutch East Indies. However, even though the subaltern succeeds in fighting the Dutch by being traitors in the short story, the subaltern still fails to fight against global hegemony. The fall of the Dutch army strengthens other Western powers in the Dutch East Indies, which is British rule.

The reading of the DUB short story cannot be separated from the context of globalization today. Until now, the West continues to strengthen its hegemony in various spheres of life. It is feared that neocolonialism can turn the Indonesian nation into a subaltern in the global arena. Thus, it is necessary to have an awareness of the existence of Western hegemony.

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