PROCEEDINGS
International Conference on Literature
Himpunan Sarjana-Kesusastraan Indonesia (HISKI)
E-ISSN 2988-4357

Reconstructing colonial femininities in the English translations of *Bumi Manusia*

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Abstract: *As one of Indonesia's classic novels, Bumi Manusia by Pramoedya Ananta Toer is part of world literature as it is translated, representing the literary construction of the colonial society where women have unequal status ranging from the romanticized European woman to the stigmatized Native concubine. This paper analyzes the reconstruction of such colonial femininities through English translations of Bumi Manusia, taking into account Queen Wilhelmina as the colonial feminine ideal and Nyai Ontosoroh as the marginalized but outspoken Indigenous woman. Informed by postcolonial feminism and feminist translation studies, it uses qualitative comparative textual analysis of four source passages and their counterparts in the novel's English translation by Max Lane called This Earth of Mankind, as well as those provided by Google Translate, DeepL, and contextually triggered ChatGPT. The results demonstrate an imbalance. While characteristics of the colonial feminine ideal remain consistent in all versions, those of Nyai Ontosoroh undergo changes via three recurring operations: moralization, hierarchization, and categorial renaming. Such changes transform the moral value of her stigma and the prominence of her intelligence and civility while the European benchmark by which she is compared remains in all versions.*

Keywords: *colonial femininity, Bumi Manusia, literary translation, postcolonial feminism, world literature*

INTRODUCTION

Literature rarely stays within the confines of the language and cultural context that created it. Translation is what allows a literary text access to a new readership; which, then, becomes the primary means through which literature becomes world literature (Damrosch, 2003, 2008). In that regard, the process of circulation is inherently uneven (Casanova, 2004) and translation itself is inherently unequal, since languages can never fully substitute each other (Apter, 2006, 2013). Translation is, thus, at the core of comparative literary studies. This is especially inevitable in regards to Indonesian literature, where translation into English is crucial.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Bumi Manusia* provides a good example for such a study. Published first by Hasta Mitra in 1980, the novel depicts the life of Minke in the Dutch colonial society divided according to racial, social, educational, and gender-based hierarchies. The English translation of the novel by Max Lane entitled *This Earth of Mankind* was published for the first time in 1982 and later republished by Penguin Books in 1996. The novel is translated into 33 languages, among which are German, Japanese, and Russian (Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional, 2025; SeabadPram, 2025). Several studies of the novel in its English translation focus on its strategies in translating cultural terms (Ibadurrohman, 2019), the foreignization process (Syafitri, 2016), and paralinguistic features and onomatopoeia (Wiles, 2021). Nevertheless, these studies

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How to cite (APA 7th): Oentari, B. S. & Wiyatmi. (2026). Reconstructing colonial femininities in the English translations of *Bumi Manusia*. *Proceedings 35th KIK, 35*, 897–912.
https://doi.org/10.68634/kik.v35i.170

acknowledge the mediating process in the translation but regard it as purely linguistic and cultural rather than gender-based.

Gender, however, is key to the novel, in which women are caught between colonialism and patriarchy. The feminist scholarship has concentrated on Nyai Ontosoroh in particular: as one reclaiming identity amidst social oppression (Sofi & Basiri, 2020), one engaged in a liberal-feminist struggle (Safitri et al., 2021), one struggling against the colonial imperialism (Rahayu et al., 2019), and, finally, one whose autonomy is made possible through Western education (Haryanto & Susanto, 2026). However, these approaches are based solely on the Indonesian version, despite the fact that translation criticism of the novel pays little attention to its gender politics. Unexplored is the position of the Native woman in comparison to that of the idealized European woman and what transpires of this relation when the novel is translated into English.

This research fills this gap through the use of four passages. Two are on Queen Wilhelmina, who does not appear as a character in the story but serves as an image of femininity in Europe as beautiful, rich, glorious, powerful, and favored by God. Two passages are on Nyai Ontosoroh, who is referred to as a nyai, that is, a Native female cohabiting with a white male without being married according to law, but who is depicted as articulate, educated, and independent. This comparison is thus not based on two characters but on two positions within the colonial hierarchy of femininity. In addition to the published translation by Lane, the research analyses other versions translated by Google Translate, DeepL, and ChatGPT since such tools are increasingly being used for literary translations, although they vary in dealing with style and imagery (Gao et al., 2024; Abdelhalim et al., 2025). These translated versions provide another level of comparison instead of serving as objects of assessment. The question of the research is the following: how are the colonial femininities in *Bumi Manusia* constructed in the English translations of the novel?

LITERATURE REVIEW

World Literature, Translation, and Literary Circulation

The recent theory of world literature sees world literature not as a canon but rather as circulation and reading practice: a text can be said to become world literature if it is read outside its culture, in translation or in the original (Damrosch, 2003). This reading always occurs in a space that is determined both by the source and by the receiving culture, which is why Damrosch (2008) emphasizes the importance of contextual reading. According to Casanova (2004), this space is hierarchical because it is constructed based on an uneven distribution of literary prestige. According to Apter (2006, 2013), comparative literature should consider what does not get translated instead of taking for granted linguistic equivalence.

Translation is never impartial, as in the case of a post-colonial novel. As stated by Bassnett (2014), literary translation is always a process of negotiation between languages and cultures, and Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) also add that the process of translation has always been an exercise of colonial power. When *Bumi Manusia*, a novel about Dutch colonial society, is translated to English for a universal audience, it will require that its colonial categories are rewritten in a language that has its own colonial

past. The categories that are most susceptible to being renamed are those pertaining to gender.

Postcolonial Feminism and Colonial Femininity

Postcolonial feminism is the approach that underlies the analysis of those categories, and the central ideas underlying postcolonial feminism are united by one basic assumption: gender roles in colonialism are inseparable from the relations of power which created them. The basic assumption about the inseparability of gender and relations of power in colonialism is formulated by Mohanty (1984) in the context of her criticism of the notion of "Third World women" as homogenous entities of oppression. Later she focused on difference and power between women and the possibilities of their solidarity across boundaries (Mohanty, 2003). Historical depth is provided by the works of Lugones (2020) and McClintock (1995): the former demonstrates how colonialism did not just create one more layer of oppression but restructured gender relations altogether, while the latter describes how race, gender and sexuality co-constituted each other in the colonial discourse. Intersectionality described by Collins (2000) shows how all those intertwined relations converge in social position of a woman. Social position of a woman in Bumi Manusia is determined by race, class and marital status simultaneously. Determination of that social position, however, involves the question of representation of a woman. Spivak (1988) asks whether subaltern can be represented without being spoken for. That question is relevant to a novel where Nyai Ontosoroh is seen mostly through Minke's eyes, and equally to its translations.

Based on this understanding, this research makes use of the concept of colonial femininity as an analytic label of the gender categories and ideals formed through coloniality. The concept does not imply that all European women belong to the same identity category. The concept implies the existence of a hierarchy whereby the femininity of a European royal can be considered as whole, powerful, and transcendental, while that of a native woman is made degrading based on issues of race, class, sexual morality, and marriage. The concept is thus relational. Nyai Ontosoroh is important in this context since she challenges the category assigned to her; even though socially devalued, she represents educated and independent woman. Colonial ambivalence by Bhabha (1994) explains such a situation without necessarily labeling her as either a victim or a resister. If colonial femininity is constructed in language, however, it can also be reconstructed in translation.

Gender and Literary Translation

The field of translation studies has been criticizing the concept of transparency in translation from its early days. Translation is seen as a process of rewriting texts and altering their literary and ideological function according to Lefevere (2017). In addition, the cultural politics behind "invisible" and smooth translations are unveiled by Venuti (1998, 2017). The same approach to the criticism of translation has been extended to the area of gender in the field of feminist translation studies. Simon (1996) discusses negotiation of gender and cultural identity in translation; Flotow (1997, 2011) reveals the ways in which translation makes women invisible or more visible. In turn, Castro and Ergun (2017) conceptualize feminist translation in local and transnational contexts.

Intersectional approaches which decolonize gender narratives are urged by Niu (2025), and Yang (2025) proves that female images can be recontextualized lexically, hierarchically, and narratively even if the story remains unchanged.

AI-assisted translation brings in a modern element into this process of mediation. According to Gao et al. (2024), there are distinctions made by ChatGPT, Google Translate, and DeepL concerning the style and imagery of classical poems, which depend on the way these tools are prompted, while Abdelhalim et al. (2025) have found similar differences when it comes to cultural and linguistic nuances made by ChatGPT and Google Translate. However, despite the fact that these findings can be used as the basis for considering the results produced by AI as versions, they focus on quality and perception. The present study asks a different question: what do human and machine translations do to a specific literary construction of colonized womanhood?

METHOD

The qualitative comparative textual analysis methodology is be applied in this research since it seeks to understand the interpretation of textual meanings and not measure them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each English translation is compared to its Indonesian source text in order to detect any difference that could impact the literary depiction. As per descriptive translation studies, the analysis aims to describe what the translation does and not what it should do (Toury, 2012).

The source text used is the novel *Bumi Manusia* by Pramoedya Toer (1980). The English translation published is *This Earth of Mankind* by Pramoedya Toer (1996). The three AI-generated English versions of the same text were created using Google Translate, DeepL, and ChatGPT-5.6 Luna. ChatGPT was prompted once with the following literary context:

> "Translate the following excerpt from Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Bumi Manusia into polished literary English. The novel is a historical Indonesian literary work set during Dutch colonial rule and narrated largely from Minke's perspective. Preserve the original meaning, narrative voice, emotional tone, imagery, cultural and historical nuances, and degree of judgment, admiration, or ambiguity. Do not add, omit, explain, or modernize anything. Output only the translation."

The data in this research include four excerpts that have been selected using purposive sampling, in which data is collected not because of its representative nature but due to the relevance of the topic of the research (Palinkas et al., 2015). Data 1 and 2 refer to Queen Wilhelmina as an image in Minke's mind instead of being part of the story; Data 3 and 4 refer to Nyai Ontosoroh as a figure in the narrative identified as a nyai in the colonial period.

The analysis was conducted in three stages. The first stage involved the comparison of each English translation with its source text, identifying the lexical, phrasal, and stylistic changes. Then the identified changes were categorized based on their literary functions: idealization, emotive coloring, evaluation, dignifying, attribution, and Europeanization of femininity. Finally, the categorized changes were interpreted using postcolonial feminism and focusing on the connections between

gender, colonial oppression, marginality, and representation (Mohanty, 1984, 2003; Spivak, 1988; Lugones, 2020). The concepts from translation studies, such as rewriting and target text mediation (Lefevere, 2017; Venuti, 2017), were employed to interpret but did not serve as criteria for assessing the translations. The researcher served as the primary instrument of selection, comparison, and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The four passages reveal a pattern that is asymmetrical yet interrelated. Queen Wilhelmina is portrayed always in the form of the ideal woman, while Nyai Ontosoroh is represented in a variety of ways. She is viewed both as the colonial stereotype of a woman and as a woman who is intelligent and dignified. The discussion moves from the ideal to the marginalized subject and then to the hierarchy that connects them.

Results

The imagined colonial feminine ideal: Queen Wilhelmina

Table 1. The Idealization of Queen Wilhelmina in the Indonesian Source Text and English Translations

Source Text	Human Translation	Google Translate	DeepL	Contextual ChatGPT
Yang penting: ada di antaranya yang paling banyak kupandangi: seorang dara, cantik, kaya, berkuasa, gilang-gemilang, seorang pribadi yang memiliki segala, kekasih para dewa.	And the important thing was there was one of these that I looked at more often than any other: a photo of a beautiful maiden, rich, powerful, glorious, one who possessed everything, the beloved of the gods.	Most importantly, there was one among them upon whom I gazed the most: a maiden—beautiful, wealthy, powerful, radiant—a figure who possessed everything, a beloved of the gods.	Most importantly: among them was the one I gazed upon most often—a girl, beautiful, wealthy, powerful, radiant, one who had it all, the beloved of the gods.	What matters is this: among them was the one I gazed at most: a maiden, beautiful, rich, powerful, resplendent, a person who possessed everything, the beloved of the gods.

In Data 1, Queen Wilhelmina is imagined entirely in terms of adoration: *cantik, kaya, berkuasa, gilang-gemilang … memiliki segala, kekasih para dewa*. In the story, she does not speak or act. She is only imagined by Minke, and the addition of qualities makes her almost fully realized, uniting beauty with riches, power, brilliance, possession, and divine favor. Notably, it is interesting to observe how Minke refers to the Dutch Christian monarch as *kekasih para dewa*, which means "the beloved of the gods." The term *dewa*, which is derived from Sanskrit (Jones, 2007), and its plural, polytheistic version are not compatible with the identity of a Christian queen. On the contrary, they locate the queen's identity in a mythical context, which in the Javanese political tradition symbolizes divine legitimacy (Anderson, 1972). The mythification of the colonial model

is achieved by the colonizer through his own hybrid cultural imagination (Foulcher, 1981). Here, the colonized narrator takes the colonizing ideal and assimilates it into his own culture. The text never says that European women are better. It only imagines that they are.

All four translations maintain this structure of characteristics, along with the hierarchy of evaluation. Differences emerge in nuance. While "dara" becomes "maiden" in all four translations, maintaining the associations of youthfulness and purity, the selection of "girl" by DeepL degrades the tone of reverence. In the case of "gilang-gemilang," Lane selects "glorious," which carries imperial glory; Google Translate's "radiant" and DeepL's "radiant" aestheticize this quality to physical radiance; while ChatGPT chooses "resplendent," which includes both aspects. Additionally, Lane adds that Minke looked at "a photo of" the maiden. This addition highlights the fact not made explicit in the source text: The Queen is nothing more than a picture for Minke, a colonial idealization rather than a living person. Even when rewriting produces different dominant images (Lefevere, 2017), the colonial ideal survives.

Table 2. The Romanticization of Queen Wilhelmina in the Indonesian Source Text and English Translations

Source Text	Human Translation	Google Translate	DeepL	Contextual ChatGPT
Pada waktu-waktu menganggur sering aku pandangi wajahnya sambil mengandai-andai: betapa, betapa, betapa.	Whenever I had nothing to do, I would gaze at her face while supposing how it would be to court her. How would it be!	In idle moments, I often gaze at her face while letting my imagination run wild—thinking: if only, if only, if only.	In my spare moments, I often gaze at her face, lost in daydreams: oh, oh, oh.	During idle moments I would often gaze at her face, imagining: how, how, how.

Data 2 turns the focus away from the ideal and toward Minke's desire, from the valuation of a woman to the narrator's 'expressive meaning' (Baker, 2018). Data 2 ends with the triple exclamation *betapa, betapa, betapa*, which is an incomplete construction where the object of exclamation is unspecified, while every translation finishes or re-interprets it in a different way. Lane translates it as "supposing how it would be to court her. How would it be!", turning an undefined exclamation into a very specific fantasy of courtship. This is an obvious example of explicitation, when a translation makes explicit what is left implicit in the source text (Blum-Kulka, 1986). Additionally, Lane omits the triple repetition, which is a common strategy in literary translations as Ben-Ari (1998) describes. It reveals the hidden transgression in this text: the desire of the local schoolboy to court the Dutch queen. In the Indies, this kind of desire breaking the racial barriers that were controlled by the colonizers via intimate regulation (Stoler, 2010).

Fanon (2008) interprets the colonized man's desire for the white woman as his desire for the recognition provided by whiteness. The courtship of Lane, therefore, emphasizes the colonial aspects of the desire, but transforms the Queen into an object of the male desire. The repetition of "if only, if only, if only" in Google Translate makes the desire untrue, thereby indicating its impossibility and, by implication, the racial

difference between the subject and the object of desire. As Indonesian does not use grammar to indicate tenses (Sneddon et al., 2010), each translator must decide on a temporal setting, and in this case, Google Translate translates the text into the present tense ("I often gaze"). While DeepL's "lost in daydreams: oh, oh, oh" renders the desire into a series of sighs, ChatGPT's "how, how, how" retains the repetitive quality of the source text.

The distinction between Data 1 and Data 2 indicates that while the symbolic hierarchy is easily translatable, the affect attached to it is not. In each case, the Queen is portrayed in full force. Only the colonized male viewer who is observing her picture is altered in terms of his function, be it that of the suitor, the romantic dreamer, or the silent admirer. It reminds one of Mulvey's (1975) notion of the male gaze, according to which woman becomes the object of vision and the man is its subject, the bearer of the look. In the present case, the bearer of the look is a colonized subject himself. The power and desirability of the ideal are mutually reinforcing. She is desired because she is in power, and she is powerful because he desires her.

The marginalized Indigenous feminine subject: Nyai Ontosoroh

Table 3. The Ambivalent Representation of Nyai Ontosoroh in the Indonesian Source Text and English Translations

Source Text	Human Translation	Google Translate	DeepL	Contextual ChatGPT
Aku masih terpesona melihat seorang wanita Pribumi bukan saja bicara Belanda begitu baik, lebih karena tidak mempunyai suatu komplex terhadap tamu pria. Di mana lagi bisa ditemukan wanita semacam dia? Apa sekolahnya dulu? Dan mengapa hanya seorang nyai, seorang gundik? Siapa pula yang telah mendidiknya jadi begitu bebas seperti wanita Eropa?	I was amazed not only that this Native woman could speak Dutch so well, but also that she was so relaxed with a male guest. Where was she educated? And why was she only a nyai, a concubine? And who educated her to be so free, just like a European woman?	I remained captivated, watching an indigenous woman who not only spoke Dutch so fluently but—more strikingly—showed no trace of inhibition or complex in the presence of a male guest. Where else could one find a woman like her? What was her schooling? And why was she merely a nyai—a concubine? Who had educated her to be so unconstrained, so like a European woman?	I was still fascinated to see an indigenous woman who not only spoke Dutch so well, but also showed no sense of inferiority toward a male guest. Where else could one find a woman like her? What school did she attend? And why was she merely a nyai, a concubine? Who had raised her to be so free-spirited, like a European woman?	I was still fascinated to see an Indigenous woman who not only spoke Dutch so well, but, even more strikingly, had no complex about having a male guest. Where else could a woman like her be found? What schooling had she had? And why merely a nyai, a concubine? Who, too, had taught her to be so free, like a European woman?

Data 3 proposes an alternative form of representation. Nyai Ontosoroh is a living woman whom Minke encounters, but initially she is represented by Minke through

surprise and categorization: Where did she study, and why is she “only a nyai, a concubine,” and how did someone teach her to be “so free, like a European woman”? The status of her being a woman is determined by how she compares with how a Native woman should be, and already in translation, there are differences in how that standard of comparison is rendered. The translations start to differ in their approach to naming this expectation. Firstly, Pramoedya capitalizes "Pribumi," using this term as a name for the category rather than a description. This concept refers to the term "Inlander", one of the population categories defined in Article 109 of the colonial "Regeringsreglement," according to which Natives were to be considered a different category of people governed by another set of laws from Europeans (Yoshida, 2002). The order is described in the novel where Nyai Ontosoroh, a native woman, who was not married legally, receives no right of decision regarding her daughter from the colonial court. This category had such a strong racial connotation that the Indonesian government officially stopped using terms "pribumi" and "non-pribumi" in 1998 (Instruksi Presiden Nomor 26 Tahun 1998). Lane maintains the capital lettering and the categorical meaning of the concept using the term "native woman." Google Translate and DeepL use the lower-case term "indigenous woman," while ChatGPT uses the capital term "Indigenous woman" connected with modern political identity.

The expression *tidak mempunyai suatu komplex terhadap tamu pria* is particularly enlightening. It is because the very source text makes use of the European psychological term “komplex” (etymonline, n.d.) to describe the composure of the Native woman, thus, making even the language of evaluation to be European. While the expression “so relaxed with a male guest” given by Lane is translatable to observable ease, the expression given by Google Translate “showed no trace of inhibition or complex” repeats the term twice, and ChatGPT keeps the word “complex.” DeepL translates it as “showed no sense of inferiority toward a male guest,” thus, providing the name for the hierarchy implied by the source. This kind of explicitation is helpful for English-speaking readers to understand the gender relationship in question but it solves the ambiguity of the source and presents her confidence as a lack of an inferiority she was supposed to have. The same kind of transformation is observed in the case of *mendidiknya*. While both Lane and Google Translate keep the word “educated” and ChatGPT uses “taught,” DeepL translates it as “raised.” Because the novel ties Nyai Ontosoroh’s agency to the education she acquired (Haryanto & Susanto, 2026), DeepL’s choice quietly moves that achievement into the private sphere.

Nonetheless, all four translations maintain the crucial point of contrast with European women: “so free, like a European woman” (Lane), “so unconstrained, so like a European woman” (Google Translate), “so free-spirited, like a European woman” (DeepL), and “so free, like a European woman” (ChatGPT). DeepL adds a personal characteristic to the socially constructed one, but the very criterion of comparison is preserved throughout all translations. The freedom of Nyai Ontosoroh can be appreciated only by comparing her with European women, which means that the very appreciation of her as a woman is done by using the standard of the colonizer against whom she is measured.

The stigmatization of Nyai Ontosoroh comes out clearly from Data 4, describing her as “just a nyai,” unmarried by law, bearing children illegally, of low morality, and

sacrificing her dignity for pleasure and luxury. This list brings out the colonial discourse on nyai, a form of concubinage common in the Indies but viewed as a moral threat to European respectability (Stoler, 2010; Baay, 2010). Reduplication of nyai shows that she belongs to a type not worthy of respect rather than an individual person. All the three translations preserve the word nyai while only DeepL changes it to "concubine," thereby reducing a specific colonial practice to a general English concept.

The more significant translation issue involves *tidak mengenal perkawinan syah*, which all the four translations maintain within the legal context of Nyai's deficiency being a status that colonial society did not allow her. Lane's version of "living in sin," however, recontextualizes it in a morality framework, thus transforming a structure-bound stigma into one of individual responsibility. Google Translate's interpretation of *kadar kesusilaan rendah* as "a woman of loose morals" turns a non-sexualized stigma into a sexualized one. All of these recontextualizations have immediate implications for any reading of the text. Sofi and Basiri (2020) interpret the stigmatization of Nyai Ontosoroh in terms of social exclusion, and Safitri et al. (2021) understand her plight in terms of liberal feminism and its fight for legal rights. Both readings depend on the legal frame that Lane's moralization obscures.

Table 4. The Stigmatization of Nyai Ontosoroh in the Indonesian Source Text and English Translations

Source Text	Human Translation	Google Translate	DeepL	Contextual ChatGPT
Dia hanya seorang nyai-nyai, tidak mengenal perkawinan syah, melahirkan anak-anak tidak syah, sejenis manusia dengan kadar kesusilaan rendah, menjual kehormatan untuk kehidupan senang dan mewah. Dan tak dapat aku katakan dia bodoh. Bahasa Belandanya cukup fasih, baik dan beradab; sikapnya pada anaknya halus dan bijaksana, dan terbuka, tidak seperti ibu-ibu Pribumi; tingkahlakunya tak beda dengan wanita Eropa terpelajar.	She is just a nyai, living in sin, giving birth to illegitimate children, low in moral character, selling honor to live easily and in luxury. And I couldn't say she was ignorant. Her Dutch was fluent, and polite. Her attitude toward her daughter was refined and wise and open, not like that of Native mothers. She behaved just like an educated European woman.	She was merely a nyai—unacquainted with lawful marriage, bearing illegitimate children, a woman of loose morals who sold her honor for a life of ease and luxury. Yet, I could not call her ignorant. Her Dutch was fluent, refined, and cultured; her attitude toward her child was gentle, wise, and open—unlike that of native mothers—and her demeanor was no different from that of an educated European woman.	She was just a concubine, unfamiliar with lawful marriage, giving birth to illegitimate children—a person of low moral character who sold her honor for a life of pleasure and luxury. And I cannot say she was foolish. Her Dutch was quite fluent, refined, and cultured; her attitude toward her children was gentle, wise, and open—unlike that of native mothers; her behavior was no different from that of an educated European woman.	He was merely a nyai, knew nothing of lawful marriage, bore illegitimate children, a kind of human being of low moral character, selling her honor for a life of comfort and luxury. And I could not call her stupid. Her Dutch was quite fluent, good and refined; in her manner toward her children she was gentle and wise, and open, unlike Pribumi mothers; her behavior was no different from that of an educated European woman.

The passage continues with a turn: *Dan tak dapat aku katakan dia bodoh*. The translations challenge these inadequacies in their own ways: "ignorant" (Lane, Google Translate) concerns knowledge, "foolish" (DeepL) judgment, and "stupid" (ChatGPT) intellect. However, the use of "Yet" in Google Translate highlights this turn. The evidence that follows is equally sensitive. The source says nyai's Dutch was *baik dan beradab*, and *beradab* means "civilized," which calls into mind the civilizational hierarchy through which the colonial order created European whiteness (Locher-Scholten, 2000). Google Translate and DeepL retain this meaning with "cultured," ChatGPT qualifies it with "refined," and Lane strips away its connotation with "polite." According to Berman (2004), this is a qualitative impoverishment: the word stays, but its cultural resonance does not. This reduction undermines Haryanto and Susanto's (2026) definition of nyai's agency as being educated enough to be civilized according to the colonizer's own standards.

It follows, then, that the passage concludes in the novel's central paradox, wherein the morally "inferior" woman exemplifies the characteristics of an educated and respectable woman, while the colonial power structure itself is undermined from within. It is in this way that the idea of ambivalence put forth by Bhabha (1994) helps one understand how the subordinated subject both belongs to and demonstrates the deficiency in the category she is placed into. This is precisely when the resistance found in Nyai Ontosoroh by Rahayu et al. (2019) manifests in the text, since her behavior contradicts the category in which she is named.

An additional transformation is worth noting. ChatGPT begins with "He was merely a nyai," but from the context, the gender neutral *dia* refers to the Nyai Ontosoroh. The following reference to "her" indicates that this is a local problem instead of systemic transformation of the gender. Nevertheless, this is an example of the tendency of machine translation to prefer masculine references while translating from a language without grammatical gender (Prates et al., 2020; Savoldi et al., 2021). The error is illustrative in that it arises just where the woman gets her name and is socially criticized. It has been noted in feminist studies on translation for decades now that translation can either increase or decrease visibility of gender (Simon, 1996; Flotow, 1997, 2011). In this case, a gender-neutral source pronoun hides the woman right where she is criticized.

Discussion

Reconstructing the hierarchy of colonial femininities

Together, these four texts create relational stances, not two distinct portrayals. Wilhelmina, Queen of the Netherlands, is the stereotype that establishes the symbolic ideal of beauty, riches, power, splendor, perfection, and divine blessing, while Nyai Ontosoroh is the social type whose intelligence and behavior reveal the vulnerability of the type into which she has been placed.

Three operations that repeat throughout this comparison include moralization, the process whereby legal and civilizational terminology becomes moral and behavioral in nature as seen in Lane's "living in sin" and Google Translate's "loose morals." The second operation is hierarchical naming wherein the relationships implied in the source are named in the translation as seen in Lane's courtship and DeepL's "inferiority."

Finally, there is a relabeling operation where the colonial category gets re-labeled through the translation process. Lane alone translates *Pribumi* as the colonial category "Native" while Google Translate and DeepL interchange between "indigenous" and "native," ChatGPT switches between the current day "Indigenous" and *Pribumi*, and DeepL translates "nyai" into "concubine." In all cases, however, the Queen remains untouched while Nyai Ontosoroh is the subject of focus. This asymmetry results from the materials comprising the portrait of each person. The ideal woman is constructed from evaluative terms having obvious English equivalents while the marginalized woman is constructed using historically grounded terms (*nyai, Pribumi, syah, beradab, komplex*). To translate her is necessarily to reposition her.

This contrast also problematizes any easy dichotomy between human and machine translations. Lane's translation represents the most interpretive ones. They are driven by narrative knowledge and generate coherence along with ideological rewriting. Machine translations remain true to the lexicon of the source but perform category changes of their own, from DeepL's "concubine" to ChatGPT's error of gender categories despite the prompting context. Thus, the important point here is not the fact that it was either a human or machine that performed the translation, but the type of mediation involved.

These findings relate to Indonesian literature circulating globally. In case of translation, a literary work becomes transformed when entering into a new literary sphere (Damrosch, 2003). Thus, what is read by English speakers of "Bumi Manusia" is not just an Indonesian historical novel, but a specific interpretation of the colonial world and femininities in it. The hierarchy turns out to be flexible, but not fluid. As a result, the European ideal does not change, whereas the Indigenous woman is being transformed because she is a point of confrontation of different discourses.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how the colonial femininities of *Bumi Manusia* are reconstructed in English through four passages: two presenting Queen Wilhelmina as the idealized femininity of Minke's imagination, and two presenting Nyai Ontosoroh as a stigmatized Native woman who defies the stereotype attached to her colonial status. Across Max Lane's translation and the three AI-generated versions, the overall hierarchy of femininities is maintained, but its local realization changes. The Queen's beauty, wealth, power, splendor, completeness, and divine favor remain constant, while Minke's desire for her is rendered variously as courtship, counterfactual longing, or exclamation. Nyai Ontosoroh's portrayal varies far more, through moralization, explicitation of hierarchy, and categorical relabeling, which alter the moral weight of her stigma, the visibility of her intellect and civility, and the terms of her comparison with educated European women.

These results support an understanding of translation as reconstruction. Translation gives *Bumi Manusia* a wider English-language readership but also shapes how its colonial gender structure reaches that readership. Human and machine translators alike retain the large structure while revaluing its details, and it is in those details that a colonized woman's dignity is either sustained or diminished. The study is limited to four passages, one published translation, and a single output from each AI tool,

and it examines textual representation rather than actual reception. Future research could extend the corpus to other female figures such as Annelies, compare translations into other languages, and investigate how readers respond to these different reconstructions.

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