

Silencing the subaltern: Postcolonial literary voices & Contemporary Military Power in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article examines the increasing influence of military power in Indonesian politics, the 2025 revision of the National Armed Forces (TNI) Law, and the growing restrictions on press freedom. Anchored in postcolonial theory—specifically Gayatri Spivak’s concept of the subaltern and Edward Said’s *Orientalism*—this study explores how state and military institutions silence public voices, particularly in the context of the recent legislation and the nationwide protests of March 20–28, 2025. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, with close reading as the primary research instrument, the analysis focuses on the character of Okonkwo and selected narrative elements in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. The article compares silencing in the novel with current repressive actions in Indonesia to argue that colonial legacies endure not only in social and political structures but also in strategies of power consolidation. The findings suggest that literary representations of colonial domination mirror broader patterns of militaristic control in postcolonial states. This study identifies structural parallels between the silencing of subaltern characters in the novel and ongoing restrictions on civil and media freedoms in Indonesia. Postcolonial literature, therefore, is not only a historical reflection but a critical lens through which to understand modern state power and its enduring colonial imprints.

Keywords: Military Power, Orientalism, Postcolonial Literature, Subaltern, *Things Fall Apart*

Introduction

In recent years, Indonesia has seen a worrying return of military influence in civilian affairs, signaling potential democratic backsliding[1]. This trend culminated in the 2025 revision of the National Armed Forces (TNI) Law, which significantly expanded the military’s authority over non-defense sectors, including education, logistics, and public order. The revision sparked widespread public outrage, culminating in nationwide protests from March 20 to 28, 2025. During these demonstrations, state and military institutions responded with force, including mass arrests, surveillance, and press censorship. The government’s approach to silencing dissent raises urgent questions about the nature of political voice, civil freedoms, and authoritarian persistence in post-reformasi Indonesia.

Although studies have explored the civil–military dynamic and its institutional challenges, little attention has been given to how state repression operates on the narrative and symbolic levels—particularly in how public voices are framed, excluded, or delegitimized. Most recent political analyses focus on structural dimensions: electoral shifts,

elite bargaining, and policy rollback [2]). However, there is a significant gap in understanding the discursive strategies of power—how the state constructs dissent as “disorder,” and how such framing echoes colonial logics of domination.

To address this gap, this study refers to postcolonial literary theory, particularly Gayatri Spivak’s notion of the subaltern [3] and Edward Said’s Orientalism [4]), to read the repression of civil protest through both literary and political texts. By analyzing Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* [5] alongside the events of March 2025, this paper makes the case that postcolonial literature can serve as a critical lens to examine the enduring presence of militarized, colonial modes of silencing in postcolonial democracies.

This research offers three key contributions to the current body of scholarship:

1. It introduces a narrative-based analytical approach to studying contemporary Indonesian state violence by bridging postcolonial literary theory with political science.
2. It recontextualizes the subaltern condition in today’s Indonesia, expanding the theoretical application of Spivak’s framework to Southeast Asian democratic regression.
3. It performs a comparative reading between a postcolonial literary text and a real-world political event, revealing structural parallels in how power silences oppositional voices across contexts.

The study is guided by the following research questions: How do state and military institutions in Indonesia construct and deploy narratives to delegitimize and silence civil dissent in 2025?. In what ways do the forms of subaltern silencing in *Things Fall Apart* mirror the repression of contemporary Indonesian protestors?. How can postcolonial literature serve as an interpretive tool for understanding modern authoritarian discourse in postcolonial states?. By combining literary analysis with real-world political critique, this study demonstrates that the strategies of silencing present in colonial narratives are far from obsolete—they are being actively repurposed by modern postcolonial states.

Method

This research employs a qualitative-descriptive approach, aiming to analyze how literary and political narratives construct and suppress public voices. The study does not involve numerical data but focuses on textual and discursive interpretation, making close reading the primary research instrument. The analysis is anchored in postcolonial theory, especially two key conceptual tools: Gayatri Spivak’s theory of the subaltern [3] which interrogates how marginalized voices are structurally silenced within dominant discourses. Edward Said’s concept of [4]), which critiques how dominant powers produce knowledge about “the Other” as a form of control. These theoretical perspectives serve as the interpretive framework to analyze both the literary text and the socio-political context in Indonesia. They are not treated as abstract references but as analytical tool that guide the reading of events and narratives. The study applies *close reading* to identify patterns of voice suppression and power consolidation in both literary and real-world contexts. A comparative lens is used to draw structural parallels between the mechanisms of subaltern silencing in the novel and the current actions of the Indonesian state and military. This methodological framework allows

for a layered interpretation, combining literary critique with socio-political analysis to uncover how state power continues to operate through inherited colonial strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis of the 2025 protests (20–28 March) against the revision of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) Law reveals a recurring pattern of silencing that resonates both with postcolonial literary narratives and contemporary political practices. Drawing on a combination of literary interpretation and socio-political data, this study identifies how mechanisms of power manifest in both discursive and material forms.

First, field reports and media coverage documented mass arrests (over 700 protestors), intimidation of journalists, and heightened surveillance throughout major cities. The *Jakarta Post* (2025) noted that Indonesia dropped significantly in the Global Press Freedom Index, while international outlets such as *The Guardian* (2025) reported grotesque threats against journalists, including deliveries of pig heads and rats to media offices. These findings confirm the narrowing space for dissent and freedom of the press, especially during politically sensitive debates about military authority.

Second, a comparative literary analysis of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* [5] demonstrates that Okonkwo’s community encounters silencing strategies strikingly similar to those deployed in Indonesia today. In Chapter 3, when the British colonial court undermines Igbo traditional justice, the subaltern voice is rendered illegitimate, echoing Gayatri Spivak’s [3] thesis that the subaltern cannot speak within hegemonic structures. Likewise, contemporary Indonesian citizens face delegitimization: protests were framed as disorderly or “threats to stability,” reflecting Edward Said’s ([4]) Orientalist logic of control through representation. To consolidate these observations, the research findings are summarized in Table 1, which juxtaposes narrative mechanisms of silencing in Achebe’s novel with state practices in Indonesia during March 2025.

Table 1. Structural Parallels of Subaltern Silencing

No.	Narrative Mechanism in <i>Things Fall Apart</i>	Political Mechanism in Indonesia (March 2025)	Theoretical Anchor
1.	Colonial Court invalidates Igbo voices and imposes.	State frame protest as public disorders and criminalizes dissent.	Spivak - Subaltern Silence
2.	Okonkwo’s resistance delegitimized as violent and irrational.	Protestors portrayed as anarchist in stated media.	Said - Orientalist representation
3.	British use violence and surveillance to maintain control.	Military police collaboration: mass arrests, intimidation of journalists.	Continuity of colonial strategy.
4.	Traditional forms of justice erased from discourse.	Civil and press freedom curtailed (AJI, LBH reports, Press Freedom Index	Postcolonial authoritarianism.

Findings

Narrative Construction as Repression

The Indonesian state in 2025 systematically framed the protests against the revision of the TNI Law as 'chaos' and a 'threat to stability'. This narrative is a typical discursive framing strategy in postcolonial regimes to suppress political opposition. President Prabowo, for example, referred to the protests as possibly 'foreign-paid' (Tempo, 2025), which serves to delegitimise civilian aspirations. This finding is in line with Solis & Sagarzazu [6] who point out that leaders in unstable democracies often use destabilising rhetoric to attack the media and opposition, rather than recognise them as a legitimate part of democracy. [7] Sheen, Tung, and Wu asserted that modern authoritarian regimes maintain legitimacy through media control and discourse framing. Furthermore, Sinpeng [8] highlights how digital media control and internet access restrictions are important tools in authoritarianism in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. This reinforces the finding that the framing of protest narratives does not only occur in traditional media, but also in the digital realm, where censorship and silencing are carried out through the control of online platforms. Lorch & Mauk [9] add that democratic regression in Indonesia is also affected by weakening public support for civil society, which contributes to the narrowing of civic space for opposition and criticism. This reinforces the argument that the state's narrative of silencing opposition operates in the context of broader democratic regression.

Continuity of Colonial Logics

A comparative analysis of Things Fall Apart shows how British colonial courts delegitimised the Igbo customary legal system (Achebe, 1958, Chapter 3). Indigenous voices were positioned as inferior and illegitimate, in accordance with Spivak's [3] thesis that the subaltern cannot speak within colonial hegemonic structures. The parallels with the Indonesian situation are clear: the 20-28 March 2025 protest was constructed as a 'threat to public order' (BBC, 2025), not a legitimate political expression. Power & Warburton ([2] highlight how democratic backsliding in Indonesia was fuelled by elites using the law to shut down opposition. Gufron et al. ([10]) highlighted how the 2025 TNI Bill indicates an expansion of military authority into the civilian sphere without strong civilian control, reflecting a continuation of colonial patterns of societal control. Sinpeng [8] asserts that digital authoritarianism is a continuation of colonial patterns of control transformed into the realm of information technology, where the state uses censorship and digital surveillance to suppress subaltern voices. [9] Lorch & Mauk highlighted how political elites in Indonesia use legal tools and security forces to curb civil society, which is a contemporary manifestation of colonial patterns that close spaces for political participation. The findings confirm the structural continuity between 19th century colonial strategies and 21st century postcolonial state practices, both in the material and digital realms.

Vulnerability of Media Freedom

Field data shows an increase in intimidation against journalists during the March 2025 protests. *The Guardian* (28 March 2025) reported grotesque threats such as the delivery of pig heads and rats to media offices, while *The Jakarta Post* (2025) noted Indonesia's significant drop in the Global Press Freedom Index. The AJI report (2024) confirmed confiscation of reporting equipment, censorship, and physical attacks on journalists. These findings are consistent with international literature: Kim & Shin [11] showed the psychological impact of anti-press violence that has a chilling effect on freedom of expression. [12] Junius and Lazuardi [13] highlight the fragility of press freedom in Indonesia and the practice of news trading that makes the media the mouthpiece of the elite. [8] Sinpeng adds that restrictions on freedom of expression in the digital realm exacerbate the condition of traditional press freedom, creating a media ecosystem that is increasingly constrained and controlled by the state. [9] Lorch & Mauk also point out that declining public support for civil society weakens the position of independent media as a watchdog of power, increasing the risk of repression and silencing. All this reinforces Spivak's [3] thesis that subaltern voices are only recognised within the dominant framework, and Said's [4] that repression works through hegemonic representation.

Literature as Critical Archive

Things Fall Apart illustrates how colonialism alienated the Igbo youth through the spread of religion and the institutionalisation of Western discourse (Achebe, 1958, Chapter 16). Colonial domination was not only through physical violence, but also control of representation. Spivak [3] asserts that the subaltern can only 'speak' if its voice is translated within the dominant framework, thus remaining politically illegitimate. In the Indonesian context, the rhetoric of 'foreign henchmen' (Tempo, 2025) positions the opposition as inauthentic others, delegitimising their political claims. Masduki ([14]) explains that media control in Indonesia's digital politics operates as a form of digital authoritarianism, where the state strategically manages online narratives to suppress civic activism and delegitimise opposition voices. [15] Jatmiko adds that digital repression normalises censorship and surveillance as new forms of state violence. Sinpeng [8] underlines that digital authoritarianism not only restricts physical space, but also virtual space, which becomes a new arena for civil resistance. [9] Lorch & Mauk asserts that the decline of democracy and the weakening of civil society exacerbate conditions of repression, making postcolonial literature an important tool for understanding the dynamics of power and resistance in contemporary postcolonial countries. As such, postcolonial literature functions as a critical archive [5] that exposes the way modern authoritarianism reproduces colonial logics.

Discussion

The discussion is structured around the three guiding research questions weaving together postcolonial theory, literary interpretation, and political analysis.

1) The Indonesian state employs *discursive framing* as a core strategy of silencing. Government statements consistently portrayed the protests as *chaotic* and *threats to order*, thereby justifying police-military intervention. This is consistent with [6] observation that leaders in unconsolidated democracies often attack the media as a destabilizing force rather than a democratic necessity. This framing strategy is not unique to Indonesia; comparative

authoritarian studies [7] highlight how regimes manipulate media narratives to sustain legitimacy while simultaneously suppressing dissent. In Indonesia, intimidation of journalists during the March protests – from online harassment to physical threats – reflects how narrative construction is paired with coercive tactics, closing the space for counter-discourse. By casting dissent as illegitimate, the state mirrors colonial logics of control: the colonizer delegitimized native resistance by naming it “savage” or “disruptive.” The persistence of such discourse in postcolonial Indonesia suggests that authoritarian regimes borrow heavily from inherited colonial repertoires.

2) Achebe's narrative represents the erasure of indigenous voices under colonial domination, which is visible through the marginalisation of Okonkwo as a respected figure and of the indigenous community in relation to the British colonial court institution. In chapter 3, the British court is depicted imposing sentences and enforcing new rules that are not in line with the norms and customary laws of the Igbo community. The colonial presence not only usurped legal authority, but also established cultural dominance through the spread of a new religion that gradually replaced the traditional belief system. This transformation created a generation of young people who were alienated from their ancestral traditions, while their involvement in the new religion placed them outside the realm of ‘legitimate discourse’. This is in line with Spivak's [3] claim that the subaltern has no space to speak in the colonial hegemonic discourse. Similarly, Indonesian protestors in March 2025 were denied the legitimacy of voice. Reports from AJI and Amnesty International documented press restrictions, including confiscation of cameras and censorship of protest coverage. Protestors were delegitimized as “troublemakers,” a rhetorical move that effectively silences their claims to justice and reform. This narrative parallel is not merely metaphorical; it reveals the continuity of silencing strategies across colonial and postcolonial contexts. Just as Okonkwo's story is overwritten by colonial authority, Indonesian citizens' grievances are suppressed under militarized state discourse.

3) Postcolonial literature provides a conceptual framework that allows us to connect literary narratives with real political practices. [4] theory of *Orientalism* underlines how power creates representations of the ‘other’ as a means of control. This pattern is visible both in the colonial narratives in *Things Fall Apart* and in the way the Indonesian state constructs negative images of civil protests. By combining the theories of Spivak and Said, this research shows that modern authoritarian discourse is not a new phenomenon, but rather a continuation of re-adapted colonial patterns. Literature, in this case, becomes not only a reflection, but also an analytical tool to reveal mechanisms of silencing that may escape traditional political approaches. Literature is not treated as a detached artifact but as a theoretical tool that illuminates how authoritarian discourse functions in practice. Through this lens, Indonesia's 2025 repression is not merely a political crisis but part of a longer trajectory of postcolonial authoritarian persistence. The military's expanding authority, coupled with restrictions on press freedom, signals a return to colonial logics where dissenting voices are denied legitimacy and forcibly erased from the public record.

CONCLUSION

This research highlights how Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* reveals silenced subaltern voices, relevant for understanding contemporary military power dynamics in Indonesia. Analyses of Okonkwo's character and narrative construction show how narrative

can be a tool of repression, while connections to colonial logics highlight the legacies of power that still influence modern society. Findings on the vulnerability of press freedom emphasise the importance of critical awareness of information control, and literature as critical archive confirms the novel's role in recording subaltern experiences and challenging structural domination. Overall, this research confirms that postcolonial literature is not only a historical record, but also a means of critical analysis to understand contemporary power and resistance.

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