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Reading Batavia from the Water: Canals, Ports, and Hydrocolonialism in Iksaka Banu's Novel *Rasina*

Rafi Ferdiansyah[1]*, Kharisma Qurrota Ayun[1], Siti Uswatun Khasanah[2]
[1] Departement of Language and Literature, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia
Jl. Nusantara 1, Bulaksumur, Depok, Sleman, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta 55281

[2] The University of Melbourne
Parkville Victoria 3010, Australia

Corresponding Author: rafiferdiansyah@mail.ugm.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Eighteenth-century Batavia was often imagined as the Venice of the East, a city of canals that captivated the colonial rulers. However, behind this image, water became an arena where colonialism operated in the most subtle yet brutal ways. This study offers a hydro-colonial reading using Rasina as a starting point. A qualitative approach was adopted in this study, incorporating historical and textual analyses, with a Batavia map (1740–1760) serving as a visual reference for interpreting spatial representations. The focus of this study is not on land or fortresses, but on canals, docks, and coastlines as the arteries of the city that bind commodities, bodies, and archives into a single colonial machine. Through this lens, opium and slaves appear as two extreme faces of maritime logic. Opium became a commodity whose status could be negotiated, legal or contraband, simply by manipulating port documents. On the other hand, slaves were treated as voiceless bodies, reduced to lists of ownership and administrative stamps without room for negotiation. Rasina brings this paradox to life, showing how canals and ports became arenas of struggle between the official and shadow economies. The issue of Chinese identity further sharpened the hydro-colonial landscape of Batavia. The figures of Kapitan Cina, Kong Koan, and the Boedelkamer institution illustrate the ambiguous position of the Chinese community: the backbone of the urban economy and at the same time the object of strict control by the colonial bureaucracy. Cartographic maps of Batavia (1740-1760) reveal further that canals were not merely waterways, but lines of power that united ports, government centers, ethnic areas, and Ommelanden within a single water regime. This study concludes that Batavia was not a beautiful Venice of the East, but rather a hydro-colonial laboratory: a space where water, archives, and violence converged, forming a complex landscape of power while leaving behind a long trail of cultural scars.

Keywords: *Batavia; Chinatown; hydrocolonialism; opium; slave trade*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesian prose traditions tend to be tied to the practices of colonialism on land, as these were the most visible traces of colonialism for the indigenous people who lived on the land at that time, such as the forced cultivation system, sugar cane and coffee plantations, and control of customary land. This form of representation is reinforced by colonial archives and official history, which focus more on agriculture,

agrarian contracts, and land bureaucracy, so that the position of the sea and canals often only appears as a backdrop or merely a transitional space. In fact, maritime colonialism can be described as a form of primitive colonialism: it preceded the logic of plantations by opening shipping routes, controlling strategic waters, conquering ports, and turning ships into prisons and floating territories (Paine, 2014). In other words, land-based colonialism was only possible after control of the seas was secured, such as the transportation of slaves, opium, spices, and administrative archives, which would never have been feasible without control over waterways.

Furthermore, in the context of contemporary literary studies, issues related to colonialism always place land, plantations, and administrative cities as the main locus of power production. Narratives such as land grants, agricultural exploitation, or political issues centered on land institutions are commonly found through the lens of our literary academics. However, when shifting attention to water, such as the sea, estuaries, rivers, canals, and drainage systems, a different analytical field opens up. Water is not merely a backdrop or something metaphorical, but rather an operational infrastructure that regulates the mobility of people, goods, information, and law. In the context of Batavia—as a city cartographically carved up by a network of canals connecting the coast, ports, markets, forts, and Ommelanden—it can be seen that water facilitated the circulation of slaves and opium, legal and illegal commodities, and administrative documents that became the modality of colonial surveillance (Richardson, 2024).

Reading water as a structure (rather than merely a scene) is like rephrasing the core postcolonial questions: who can move around, what can enter or leave the territory, how evidence and memory are carried away by the current, and how administrative practices—customs, manifests, fumigation, and stamps of origin—work at the maritime borders. This reading is important because it does not merely reconstruct historical economic networks and violence, but rather represents the material ways in which corruption, illegal trade, and even human trafficking operate in the cracks of maritime bureaucracy. These dimensions are often overlooked when studies focus solely on the mainland. Hydrocolonialism emerges as a response to the blind spots of classical colonialism: it functions as a historiographical method and lens that allows us to trace how colonial power operated through material, legal, and symbolic flows connecting ports, cities, and peripheral regions, and how port archives (manifests, customs lists, maps, and fumigation records) preserve the logic of colonial practices that are often missed by studies that focus solely on the mainland.

The idea of hydrocolonialism was first introduced in embryonic form by Bystrom and Hofmeyr (2017) through the metaphor of post-it notes, floating notes that mark the experimental nature of marine studies. At this stage, hydrocolonialism was defined provisionally: the prefix hydro- indicated a material shift in marine studies by placing the sea not merely as a backdrop, but as a material element with distinctive properties such as drift, unboundedness, and solvency that alter the way texts and history are read; while the suffix -colonialism directly links this framework to the postcolonial tradition, with the determination to shift the analytical center of gravity from land to the epistemology of water. These initial notes then moved towards consolidation in Hofmeyr's *Provisional Notes* (2019), which outlined more systematically how water functions both as a colonial medium and an epistemic category. It emphasizes the administrative dimension of water through customs, quarantine, fumigation, and censorship practices that turn ports and canals into technologies of hydro-colonial governance. This stage shows that water is not only processed as a geographical space but also as a category of knowledge that shapes the logic of colonial power.

This conceptual consolidation achieves a more coherent articulation—*Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and The Custom House* (Hofmeyr, 2021)—when hydrocolonialism is formulated as a theoretical umbrella that encompasses four key dimensions: 1) colonization through water, namely maritime imperialism and shipping route networks; 2) colonization of water itself, namely through control of waterways, establishment of territorial boundaries, and militarization of the sea; 3) colonies on or in water, namely ships as territorial spaces and prisons; 4) colonization of ideas about water, which gave rise to hydro-epistemologies as a new way of viewing water as an object and medium of power. The central method offered by Hofmeyr is dockside reading: transferring the practice of close reading to the dockside, which involves not only reading manuscripts but also reading goods, manifests, marks

of origin, and customs protocols that determine the legality, identity, and value of goods and texts entering the colony.

This concept is not merely conceptual terminology. Hofmeyr shows that dockside practices—methods of inspection, classification, and recording at the Custom House—produce a distinctive model of reading and ordering, in which text-bearing objects are transformed by port inspection into boundary objects that are interpreted more through external signs (origin stamps, labels, manifests) than their inner contents; this is what he calls a form of texternalization and an elemental reading born of the littoral environment. Furthermore, Hofmeyr positions the Customs institution and dockside practices as hydro-colonial technologies of governance: fumigation procedures, quarantine, tariff classification, and manifest recording become tools for regulating who and what can circulate. Thus, the port functions not merely as a node of trade but as a space of governance that produces knowledge, censorship, and economic legitimacy.

In practice, two important dynamics emerge that form the core of hydrocolonial thinking, namely: 1) colonized water, whereby water itself is turned into territory and a resource that is modified through reclamation, dredging, and the application of maritime law so that the sea becomes controllable; 2) creolized water, whereby water becomes a meeting place for various cultures, practices, and non-human agents, allowing port culture and literature to develop as a hybrid culture with distinctive forms—such as handbook/customs manuals, ship stories, and port-city narratives. Hofmeyr also links this approach to elementary media studies and contemporary ocean criticism: he calls for attention to underwater infrastructure (submarine engineering, seabed intervention), maritime geopolitical policy (sea lanes, choke points), and ecological-epidemiological dimensions (flooding, disease, waste disposal), all of which alter how we read colonial texts and archives.

John (2021) then expanded the framework of hydrocolonialism into the realm of more contemporary maritime colonialism, particularly in the Pacific region. If classical maritime colonialism is understood through trade routes, slavery, and ship mobility, then in this context, the sea is read as a toxic space inherited from nuclear practices: nuclear weapons testing, radioactive waste disposal, and pollution that has turned Pacific waters into the most toxic archive of modern colonialism. John emphasizes that hydrocolonialism is not merely a historical event, but a continuation of imperialism that crossed into the 20th and 21st centuries, in which both bodies of water and human bodies were colonized. Contaminated water creates what he calls radioactive identities, namely identities formed from ecological and biological trauma passed down across generations to Pacific communities.

Deckard (2021) uses terms such as hydro-dependency to explain how colonial and postcolonial projects build structural dependence through control over water, such as dams, canals, irrigation, reservoirs, and drainage networks. Water is positioned as a vital resource that is controlled, distributed, and manipulated for the interests of colonial government capitalism. For Deckard, water colonialism does not only take place at sea, but rather on land through the control of river flows and water distribution for plantations, mining, or urbanization. Colonial dam and canal infrastructure serves a dual purpose: first, as a technical means to facilitate production and transportation; second, as a technology of power that creates local communities' dependence on colonial structures.

Furthermore, Deckard emphasizes the concept of water autonomy as its counterpart, namely the idea of water sovereignty that appears in world literature. Literature not only depicts colonial repression through dams or giant water projects but also produces alternative political imaginations in which communities can envision freedom and autonomy through other relationships with water. In this framework, water is read as an arena of conflict between colonial dependence (hydro-dependency) and local resistance (water autonomy), making hydrocolonialism an important category for understanding how literature narrates power relations, ecology, and the possibility of emancipation.

All of these literary works show that water was the material backdrop for colonial operations. The narrative offered by Iksaka Banu in *Rasina* operates precisely at this historiographical and hydro-spatial intersection. The story, which spans from the 17th to the 18th century, places the reader on the most brutal face of colonialism: mass murder, slavery, torture, lawlessness, and human trafficking—phenomena that appear in the novel through a network of maritime

bureaucracy and city canal routes. Characters such as Jan Aldemaar and Joost Boorsveld (legal officials in Batavia and Ommelanden) are drawn into a network of slave and opium smuggling run by influential actors; amidst it all stands Rasina, a woman descended from victims of the Banda massacre (1621), a slave and servant who possesses dangerous knowledge about these forbidden practices. If we place this story on the Batavia water roadmap (1740-1760) in the novel: a map showing the coastline, estuaries, major rivers (De Groote Rivier, Buffels Rivier), main canals and smaller branches (Amsterdamsche gragt, stads binnengragt, middelsloot, and a series of gragt that crept into the Ommelanden).

Based on this geographical reading, the scenes of crime, administration, and violence depicted in the novel gain entry points for goods and people; canals as distribution and hiding routes; ethnic quarters (Chinese quarter, Javasche quarter) as nodes mapped relative to the flow; and the fort and stadhuis as decision-making centers that are materially connected by water. In other words, the map of Batavia in the novel is not merely an illustration of the setting, but a hydrographic archive that proves how illegal activities such as slave smuggling, opium trade, and evidence removal could at least take place under the gaze of a bureaucracy that itself relied on dockside protocols (manifests, origin stamps, fumigation) to filter or cover up these flows.

Unlike most other Indonesian prose works, which tend to emphasize the agrarian dimension, *Rasina* reveals how violence, slavery, and illegal trade took place through hydro-spatial networks that supported colonial city life. The flow of slave and opium smuggling, for example, cannot be understood without considering the canals that connected ports to markets, forts, and Ommelanden. Historiographically, this novel demonstrates how control over water was a prerequisite for the mobility of people and goods, and how maritime bureaucratic practices, such as manifests, labeling, and the regulation of water routes, facilitated the accumulation of colonial capital. These elements are notably absent in recent studies, such as that conducted by Annisa et al. (2024) and Umaya et al. (2024).

The urgency of this matter lies in the need to broaden the horizon of colonial studies in Indonesian prose, which has tended to focus on land-based locations such as plantations, customary lands, and agrarian bureaucracy. Meanwhile, the dimensions of the sea, ports, and canals have been largely overlooked. *Rasina's* (2023) offers a complex treasure trove of colonialism: 17th to 18th century Batavia through hydro-spatial networks such as ports, canals, and estuaries that became the infrastructure for the circulation of slaves, opium, and colonial documents. The research method used is qualitative, integrated with historical readings to understand the potential of the text and utilizing the Batavia map (1740-1760) as a basis for visual navigation.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Canals as the Hydro-Colonial Lifeline of Batavia

The northern coast of Batavia, as shown on the cartographic map above, which from a geographical perspective appears to be a periphery, in colonial practice actually served as the initial center of the hydro-colonial process. Through Hofmeyr's perspective (2021), docks and estuaries were not merely transit points; they were places where the outside world was first translated into colonial administrative categories. Ships that docked carried not only goods and people but also a number of signs that had to be read—manifests, bills of entry, marks of origin—which transformed cargo into data that could be processed by the bureaucracy. The coastline functioned as a translation machine: everything that passed through the seashore was filtered, classified, and reduced to text that determined legal status, economic value, and capacity for mobility. In hydrocolonial terms, the coast is an epistemic threshold: a space where the sea becomes territorial through practices of marking and recording.

The practices that take place at the docks—customs, quarantine, fumigation, manifest inspection, and merchandise marking—are techniques of governance that Hofmeyr collects under the term dockside reading. These techniques not only examine the contents of cargo but also interpret its identity through external signs: origin stamps, labels, package sizes, languages on crates, and watermarks. For commodities such as opium, legality is often determined by the coherence of these documentary texts; manipulation of documents or marks can change legal status to smuggling. For humans—slaves, sailors, immigrants—the coast is understood

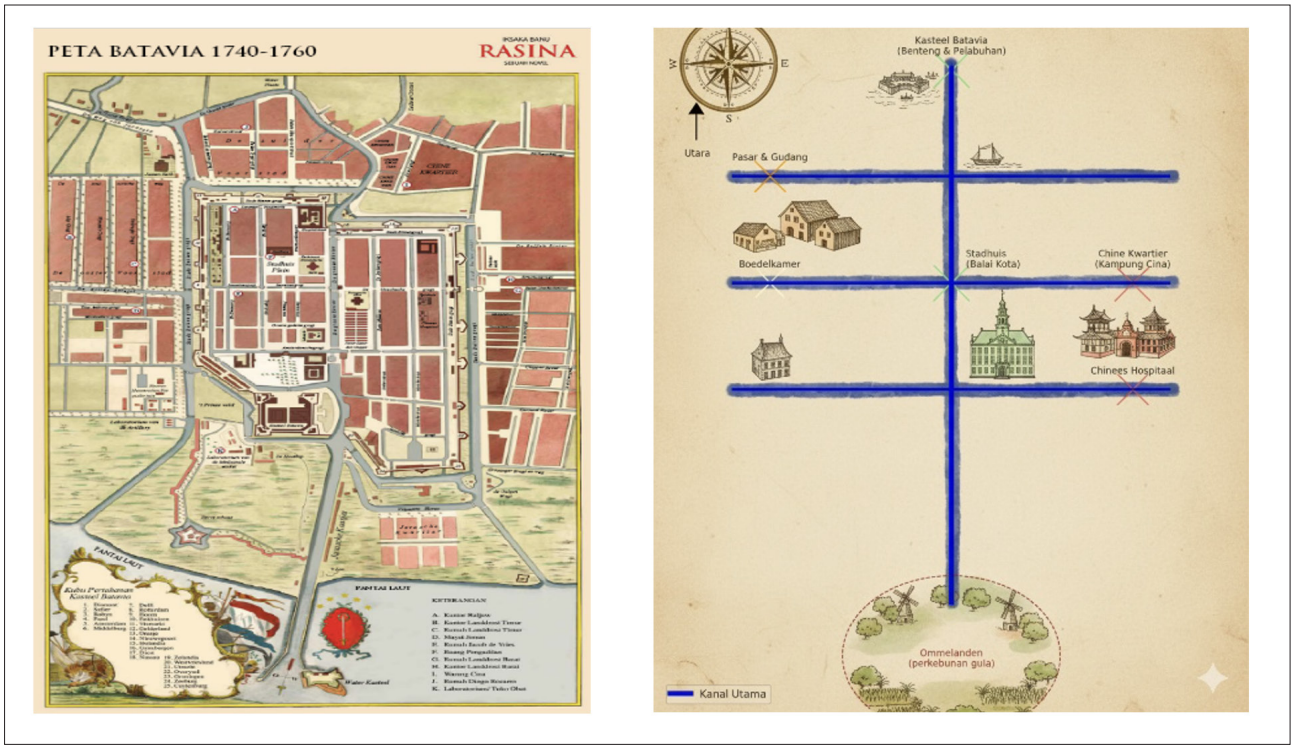

Figure 1. Schematic of Batavia's Spatial Planning Canal 1740-1760 in *Rasina*

as a place where identities and rights are recorded or absorbed into archives: names are entered into lists, status is determined by registration, and existence is mediated by administrative stamps. In short, the dock reduces the plural to entities that can be managed by the colonial state through text.

This approach also emphasizes the liminal and conflicting nature of the coast. As a threshold space, the coast plays out a number of conflicting logics: it is both a point of integration (connecting hinterland production to world markets) and a point of control (an administrative sensor for legality and security). However, this liminality also opens up opportunities for informal practices such as small waterways, back channels, and compromises by officials that provide space for the shadow economy—opium smuggling, the unofficial shipment of slaves, or attempts to thwart Boedelkamer audits. Hofmeyr and Bystrom (2017) emphasize that hydrocolonialism contains this paradox: water facilitates the monopoly of power, but its fluid conditions and networks also provide openings for local resistance and negotiation. Thus, the coast is a field of epistemic conflict: a place where imperial rules are both enforced and tested.

From a political and cultural perspective, interpreting the coast as an epistemic zone shows that maritime colonialism not only shaped physical spaces (ports, warehouses, canals) but also formed regimes of knowledge and morality. Port archives, such as manifests, registers, and fumigation reports, became valid evidence in court, the basis for taxation, and a tool for enforcing social stigma (e.g., criminalization of ethnic groups or delegitimization of certain communities). Therefore, reading the coast within the framework of hydrocolonialism means reading how the center of power constructs normality: who is considered normal to pass through, who must be monitored, and how the value of commodities and humans is codified. For literary readings such as *Rasina's*, the skillful depiction of the coast opens up a way to see how stories about opium, slaves, and the Chinese diaspora are tied to real administrative practices: practices that transform maritime cargo into political archives that support colonialism.

The 18th-century canalization of Batavia, as shown in the simplified cartographic map in

the visual diagram above, reveals that this process was not merely a transportation network—it was the backbone of colonial spatial planning that connected, marked, and regulated all economic, administrative, and social activities. Main canals such as De Groote Rivier, Amsterdamschegragt, and Tygergragt acted as axes that carried cargo from the estuary to warehouses, markets, and government centers. In this arrangement, Kasteel Batavia at the estuary, Stadhuis in the administrative center, and markets/warehouses lined along the waterways emphasized the function of canals as engines of capital accumulation—accelerating the flow of spices, sugar, opium, and other goods—while their connectivity to the Ommelanden made canals a direct link between peripheral production and the colonial center.

At the same time, the location of the Chinese Quarter on the canal side and institutions such as the Chineese Hospital reveal a dual logic: proximity to the canal gave the Chinese community economic access (labor mobility, market access, role as trade intermediaries), but that same proximity placed them within the reach of administrative and fiscal oversight: The Boedelkamer and conglomerate of colonial institutions exploited this proximity to collect taxes, audit inheritances, supervise hospitals, and report everything to the *Hoge Regering* and *College van Schepenen.* Within the framework of hydrocolonialism, this pattern reads the canal as epistemic infrastructure: every ship, manifest, or package that passed through was not only physical cargo but also text that was read, classified, and given legal status—customs documents, stamps of origin, fumigation records became a medium that transformed goods (or even people) into commodities or administrative property.

In other words, the canal system both produced and reinforced a spatial hierarchy that connected the center of power with the trade network but also demarcated ethnic areas and human bodies through documentary practices that normalized control, criminalization, and sometimes violence: as in the case of the repression of the Chinese community, which is recorded in historical sources. Thus, a map is not merely a map of geographical positions; it is a map of power: canalization in Batavia mapped economic circulation and simultaneously mapped the bureaucratic regime that read, assessed, and distributed rights of movement over goods, bodies, and communities as the core of what is meant by hydro-colonial practices. In this sense, the canal is the lifeblood of hydro-colonialism, uniting trade, administration, and repression in a single line of power flowing through the heart of Batavia.

Thus, a hydro-colonial reading of Batavia reveals the close connection between the coast as a peripheral space and epistemic gateway, and the central city canal as an administrative infrastructure that organizes the entire colonial city. The northern coast of Batavia, which appears marginal on cartographic maps, was in fact a strategic point where everything was first translated into the logic of colonial archives. Through customs, quarantine, fumigation, and dockside reading, commodities and humans were separated from their material or subjective wholeness and reduced to administrative signs that could be managed. This is similar to what Stoler (2008) says, that colonial archives are never neutral; they are epistemic instruments that produce hierarchies, discipline mobility, and preserve traces of colonial power's anxiety in controlling what is considered wild and disorderly. In other words, the periphery in the coastal context functions as the main entry point for colonial biopolitical mechanisms, where the outside world is first filtered and codified into archives that can be managed by the empire.

Meanwhile, the canals in the center of Batavia reinforce hydro-colonialism at a deeper level. On one hand, canals are a material medium connecting the Castle, City Hall, warehouses, and markets with the hinterland Ommelanden. However, on the other hand, canals are also an epistemic medium that allows the flow of goods and bodies to be controlled through documents, registration, and marks. As Stoler (2008) shows, such archival practices construct a colonial common sense that defines who is legitimate, who is dangerous, and who can be mobilized. The canals of Batavia, in this framework, are not merely water infrastructure, but archival devices that fold space, bodies, and commodities into imperial logic.

The relationship between the coast and the city center canals also reflects what Gilroy (1993) refers to as the Black Atlantic: the sea and maritime routes that were a transnational arena where slavery, trade, and colonial culture converged and shaped global modernity. Batavia, with its port on the coast and canals in the city center, presented an Asian variant of the same logic. The waterways in Batavia

not only facilitated the trade of spices, opium, and slaves but also structured ethnic segregation, created spaces of surveillance for the Chinese community, and normalized forms of colonial violence that spanned oceans. In other words, Batavia became an integral part of Asia's version of the Black Atlantic: a maritime network that united colonial economies, administrative repression, and cross-cultural dynamics.

From this perspective, Batavia cannot be read simply as a port city, but must be understood as a hydro-colonial machine: a space in which the periphery (the coast) and the center (the city canal) support each other in creating a colonial order that unifies the economy, administration, and repression. The coastline served as an initial filter gate, while the city center canal became the backbone of power distribution; together, they formed a unified water regime that bound the outside world to the colonial heart. This is what made 18th-century Batavia not merely the *Venice of the East* as claimed by Europeans, but a laboratory of maritime power where water, archives, and colonial violence converged to build a complex landscape of power.

Commodities and Bodies: Reading Opium and Slaves through Port Archives

Control over international shipping routes, control over spice distribution channels, and dominance over strategic ports such as Batavia were central strategies employed by the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC) in enforcing its colonial monopoly (Gupta, 2022). In this context, the sea can no longer be understood merely as a medium of transportation, but rather as an infrastructure of power that enabled colonial projects to run. Through the sea, production areas in various islands were connected to colonial administrative centers; it was also through the sea that the mobility of slaves and workers was enforced to support the empire's economic machine. Matters such as the construction of forts, artificial estuaries, and canal networks in Batavia were also part of the colonial project to organize water spaces in accordance with the logic of maritime trade. Not only that, maritime routes also became channels for the circulation of opium and illegal commodities that formed a shadow economy under the official structure of the VOC.

This was later clarified by Souza (2009), in the context of the opium trade in Java between 1684 and 1796, as one of the financial foundations of the VOC. Opium not only functioned as an economic commodity but also as a political instrument that supported the financial stability of the empire when profits from spices began to decline. This entire practice was entirely dependent on maritime networks: the port of Batavia, the canals connecting the city with the Ommelanden, and shipping routes to consumption centers. The sea routes enabled the legal distribution of opium through the VOC's control system, while also opening up vast opportunities for illegal practices in the form of smuggling, which even involved colonial officials themselves. Opium, in this context, is a concrete example of how the sea had a dual function: as an official medium for the accumulation of colonial capital, and as a gray area that gave rise to corruption and the shadow economy.

Opium smuggling—which occurred in *Rasina*—in the context of hydrocolonialism is understood not only as an economic phenomenon but also as a textual phenomenon. Every opium shipment was accompanied by a trail of documents: ship manifests, customs lists, bills of entry, and marks of origin recorded at the port office. These archives form a layer of administrative text that is as determinative of value as the contents of the goods themselves. Hofmeyr shows that the practice of dockside reading at the Custom House meant that text-bearing goods, such as opium packages, were read first through their external markings (labels, origin stamps, numbers, watermarks) rather than their internal contents. Only a small portion of cargo was actually physically inspected; the rest was legitimized or suspected through documentary texts. Thus, opium operated as a colonial text shaped by maritime bureaucracy: it was defined as legal or illegal through a system of signs, archives, and port classifications. Deviations in documents, such as changes in markings, concealment of manifests, or manipulation of marks, can change the status of goods from legal to contraband. Reading the opium trade in Batavia also means reading port archives, where the colonial economy and administrative texts are intertwined and form the logic of hydro-colonial governance.

In addition to opium, *Rasina* also touched on the practice of slave trading that took place through Batavia's maritime network. Unlike opium, which was

reduced to an economic commodity and controlled through administrative texts such as manifests, labels, and marks of origin, slave trading revealed a more acute dimension of dehumanization. In port archives, human bodies were treated like goods: recorded in ownership lists, classified based on name, origin, and legal status, then legalized through customs mechanisms. While opium could undergo legal negotiations—changing status from legal to contraband through document manipulation—slaves had almost no room for negotiation; their existence was only valid to the extent that it was recognized by colonial documents. Water and ports are epistemic spaces that form floating records (post-it notes)—temporary documents that bind the mobility of people and goods.

Hofmeyr (2019) clarifies this by showing that customs, quarantine, and fumigation practices at ports are ways in which water is categorized administratively. In this framework, slaves in Rasina were not only victims of human trafficking but also victims of hydro-colonial epistemology: they were captured, legalized, and distributed through port documentation practices that turned canals and ports into machines of dehumanization. Hofmeyr (2021), through the concept of dockside reading, adds that ports function as reading machines that interpret goods not from their internal contents, but from external signs and official documents. When this mechanism is applied to humans, the bodies of slaves are read not as individuals with experiences and subjectivities, but as textual entities: names, origins, prices, ownership stamps. This process creates what can be called textual enslavement, that is, slavery carried out not only through physical chains, but through chains of archives.

Thus, *Rasina* shows how canals and ports served a dual function: first, as material infrastructure that enabled the mobility of slaves; second, as epistemic infrastructure that normalized slavery through administrative archives. The most fundamental difference with opium is in the degree of negotiation: while opium opened a loophole for the shadow economy because its legal status could be manipulated, the slave trade revealed the closed nature of the colonial system, in which humans were locked into archives without any room for negotiation. It is at this point that hydrocolonialism functions as a critical lens: it reveals that water and maritime bureaucracy are not neutral, but rather colonial instruments that create a hierarchy of value between goods and humans, while also showing how administrative texts function as tools of systematic dehumanization.

Chinese Heritage and Hydro-Colonial Archives

In *Rasina*, Chinese issues were represented by figures such as Oei Tsi Lauw (Chinese Captain), Kong Koan (Chinese Council), and the College van Boedelmeesters van Chinese en andere Onchristen Stefhuizen or Boedelkamer, which was established in 1640. The presence of these institutions shows how the Chinese community in Batavia was not only positioned as agents of the colonial economy but also as administrative subjects who were strictly controlled by the colonial government. The establishment of the Boedelkamer, for example, stemmed from stereotypes and internal tensions—unrest in funeral homes due to inheritance disputes—which were then institutionalized into structural supervision by the colonial state. In practice, the Boedelkamer not only managed inheritance but also supervised Chineese Hospitals, collected taxes, and allocated funds for the poor in the Chinese community. The accountability of this institution to the Hoge Regering and College van Schepenen also shows that the Chinese community was forced to submit to a double bureaucracy: on the one hand, they were given space to manage themselves

Figure 2. The Chinese Quarter in Batavia in *Rasina*

through *kapitan* and Kong Koan representation, but on the other hand, they were controlled by the logic of colonial archives and audits.

The 1740-1760 map of Batavia (in Rasina) clearly marks the Chine Kwartier area and institutions such as the Chineese Hospital, showing how the Chinese community was not only positioned in a specific social space but also bound within a hydro-colonial bureaucratic framework. The Chine Kwartier, as a strictly organized residential area with a network of canals, shows that the Chinese were placed in strategic proximity to the center of maritime trade and distribution, so that their labor and capital could be efficiently mobilized for colonial economic interests. However, this proximity also placed them under the strict supervision of the colonial government, because the canals and ports were not only transportation infrastructure but also instruments of social control that ensured the mobility of this ethnic group could be monitored.

Similarly, the existence of the Chineese Hospital, which was supervised by the Boedelmeesters, also shows how the Chinese body was managed through administrative and fiscal mechanisms: community taxes were collected, then partially allocated for health care, but with financial reports that had to be submitted to the Dutch authorities. Thus, both the Chine Kwartier and the Chineese Hospital can be read as representations of hydro-colonial space, where water, archives, and institutions worked simultaneously to organize the Chinese community as both economic agents and objects of control. Within this framework, Rasina reveals that colonial cartography not only recorded the geography of the city but also mapped the power relations that regulated commodities, bodies, and ethnicity through canals, ports, and administrative documents.

This narrative finding is in line with Blusse's (1981) elaboration, which describes Batavia in the 17th century to the mid-18th century as a Chinese colonial city. This term emphasizes the significant role of the Chinese community in sustaining the pulse of the colonial economy, particularly through their control of the local and regional trade sectors, as well as in the rapidly growing sugar industry in Ommelanden. However, despite being the backbone of the colonial economy, the Chinese community remained in an ambivalent position: they were given broad economic participation, but at the same time were restricted by discriminatory regulations that curtailed their freedom of mobility and reinforced social segregation. This situation culminated in the tragedy of the 1740 massacre, when the VOC turned a community that had previously been considered a strategic economic partner into a target of brutal repression, an event that demonstrated how colonialism was capable of turning a productive community into an internal enemy that had to be destroyed for the sake of imperial stability.

Additional support for this narrative comes from Riskianingrum (2013), who discusses the late 18th century and highlights another dimension of colonial relations through the archives of the VOC court (Schepenbank). In her elaboration, Chinese people often appear in criminal records—both as perpetrators and victims—and this condition gradually shaped their image as a problematic group closely associated with the criminal world. These archives function not only as legal records but also as discursive instruments that discipline bodies and ethnic identities through administrative texts.

Both pieces of literature show historical consistency that the Chinese in Batavia were not only present as a demographic or cultural element but also as a field of colonial power attraction and repulsion. They were regulated through spatial segregation (such as the Chine Kwartier), monitored through administrative institutions (such as the Boedelkamer), repressed through open violence (1740), and disciplined through legal archives (1780s-1790s). All of this confirms that the position of the Chinese in colonial Batavia was an integral part of the hydro-colonial logic, in which canals, ports, and archives not only regulated the circulation of commodities such as opium and sugar but also structured the lives of certain ethnic groups and communities through repression, documentation, and the production of discourses on criminality.

CONCLUSION

The narrator in *Rasina* takes us to a new understanding of how colonialism worked in Batavia. Colonialism has tended to be understood as a power rooted in the land, such as plantations, agrarianism, and forced labor, but this novel reveals another layer that is no less important: a colonialism that operated through water. Canals, docks, and ports are not merely geographical settings or means of transportation, but instruments

of power that make currents a medium of government. *Rasina* emphasizes that colonialism in Batavia was established not only on conquered land but also on water that was regulated, directed, and used as an administrative tool.

Water in *Rasina* appears as a paradoxical medium. On the one hand, it connects: canals transport commodities, facilitate distribution, and connect various points in the colonial city. But at the same time, water also restricts: every flow of goods and people is captured in documents, checked for legality, and given a legal status that determines life and death. This is the most subtle face of colonialism—it works through administrative practices that appear technical, but in fact give rise to a neat, orderly, and layered structure of power. Canals and ports are laboratories of bureaucracy, places where mobility is monitored, legality is negotiated, and archives are used as the basis for control.

From this point, we understand that colonial violence is not only physical but also epistemic. Goods such as opium can change status simply because of a document; human bodies, especially slaves, are reduced entirely to numbers on a list. Port archives become tools that reinforce dehumanization: humans are no longer subjects, but commodities that are written down, counted, and moved without a trace. This epistemic violence is much more difficult to trace than physical violence, because it operates in the language of administration, in official stamps, in seemingly neutral lines of registration. *Rasina* exposes this illusion of neutrality, revealing that archives are in fact instruments of power that both produce and conceal violence.

It was through this method that *Rasina* ultimately revealed herself, not as a fictional character who merely tells stories, but as an epistemic intervention that teaches us that in order to understand colonialism, we must learn to read the currents. The flows of water, goods, people, and documents that traversed the canals of Batavia embodied a form of power that not only regulated space but also produced knowledge. The new form of reading in this novel, therefore, makes a crucial contribution to the study of contemporary Indonesian literature, namely that the affirmation of colonialism must be read not only through the land that was taken over but also through the water that flowed.

STATEMENTS OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors hereby declare that this article is entirely free from any conflict of interest related to the processes of data collection, analysis, editorial handling, and publication. The authors have no competing interests regarding the submission or publication of this article in *Poetika: Jurnal Ilmu Sastra*. The authors were not involved at any stage in the editorial review or decision-making process concerning this manuscript.

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