

Ngenger Landscape in Javanese Fiction: A Bourdieusian Reading of Cultural Capital

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Abstract

This study examines the *ngenger* landscape in Javanese fiction as a socio symbolic terrain where characters pursue recognition through cultural apprenticeship, moral discipline, and class coded refinement. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and cultural capital, the study analyzes six Indonesian novels published between 1980 and 2000 that foreground *ngenger* culture: *Para Priyayi*, *Canting*, *Pengakuan Pariyem*, *Sekar*, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, and *Tirai Menurun*. Using qualitative document analysis and thematic coding, the research identifies how *ngenger* is narrated as a pathway for acquiring embodied cultural capital (e.g., linguistic registers, etiquette, self restraint), institutionalized cultural capital (e.g., schooling, professional legitimacy), and objectified forms of capital (e.g., cultural artifacts, ritual practices, and artistic labor). The findings show that *ngenger* operates as a mechanism of social mobility while simultaneously reproducing hierarchy through symbolic recognition that depends on dominant norms. The texts also reveal gendered tensions, where feminine refinement can generate symbolic esteem yet constrain autonomy. By conceptualizing *ngenger* as a landscape rather than a fixed role, this article contributes to Indonesian literary sociology and cultural studies by clarifying how local moral vocabularies are converted into cultural capital and negotiated within modernizing social fields. The study suggests that Javanese fiction functions as an archive of cultural reproduction and critique, offering a grounded framework for reading tradition, aspiration, and inequality in postcolonial narratives.

Keywords: *Ngenger*, *Javanese Fiction*, *Cultural Capital*, *Habitus*, *Bourdieu*.

Introduction

The institution of *ngenger* has long played a pivotal role in shaping Javanese social and moral life. Traditionally, *ngenger* refers to a practice in which individuals from less privileged backgrounds live and serve within noble or educated households in pursuit of knowledge, refinement, and social mobility (Suliyati, 2021). The relationship is not purely economic; rather, it embodies complex moral and affective dimensions rooted in reciprocity and devotion. Recent ethnographic and literary studies suggest that *ngenger* continues to function as a means of intergenerational learning and moral formation in many Javanese communities (Suharti, 2025). Consequently, the concept of *ngenger* offers fertile ground for exploring how cultural transmission and symbolic recognition are mediated through everyday practices and narrative imagination.

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The term landscape in this study signifies more than a spatial metaphor. It captures the dynamic and relational nature of *ngenger* as a field of social, moral, and symbolic exchange. In Javanese fiction, this landscape manifests as a terrain where service, aspiration, and recognition converge. The *ngenger landscape* becomes a literary cartography that maps how individuals navigate power relations and seek refinement (*alus*) through linguistic, moral, and behavioral adaptation (Magnis-Suseno, 1997). This conceptualization situates *ngenger* as a sociocultural formation that not only reflects but also constructs the ideals of Javanese civility, obedience, and self-discipline. As literary studies increasingly turn toward sociological readings of culture, such as those by Adi (2025) and Zustiyantoro (2024), the *ngenger landscape* provides a compelling case for understanding how literature articulates the interplay between agency and structure within local ethical systems.

Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory provides a productive framework for reinterpreting *ngenger* within this literary context. His concepts of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital* illuminate how individuals internalize social hierarchies and reproduce them through symbolic practices. Cultural capital—comprising education, language mastery, manners, and aesthetic sensibility—serves as a form of symbolic power that legitimizes one's position within a social field (Bourdieu, 1986). Through this lens, *ngenger* can be seen as a process of acquiring and converting cultural capital. It is not merely an act of service but a disciplined path of learning and transformation, in which the *ngenger* subject develops dispositions aligned with the dominant class through everyday interaction and imitation (Bourdieu, 1990). This process echoes what Suliayati (2021) calls the "moral economy of service," where loyalty and humility are rewarded with access to social recognition and education.

In Javanese fiction, this intricate process is dramatized through the portrayal of rural youth entering elite households. These narratives frequently juxtapose tradition and modernity, illustrating how *ngenger* becomes both a means of personal development and a mechanism of social control (Brenner, 1998; Geertz, 1961). The *ngenger* figure thus embodies a paradox—subordinate yet ambitious, humble yet strategic, dependent yet self-motivated. Such representations resonate with Bourdieu's (1986) notion of "symbolic struggle," wherein individuals engage in the pursuit of recognition within existing structures of domination. Fictional depictions of *ngenger* reveal how moral virtues like devotion and humility operate as technologies of self-formation that sustain the legitimacy of hierarchical relations.

Furthermore, the *ngenger landscape* reflects broader transformations in Javanese society and thought. Postcolonial and contemporary narratives have shifted from idealizing *ngenger* as an expression of moral virtue to portraying it as a site of negotiation between aspiration and inequality (Mulder, 1998; Anderson, 1990). In these works, *ngenger* is reimagined as a strategy of self-making within new cultural and economic orders. The evolution of the motif parallels shifts in Indonesian modernity, where education, refinement, and linguistic competence become markers of social prestige (Farhansyah et al., 2025). Thus, the *ngenger* motif functions not only as a cultural inheritance but also as a reflection of enduring social tensions in the process of modernization.

By situating *ngenger* within the framework of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, this study seeks to articulate how literary texts encode and transform social experience. The *ngenger landscape* becomes a theoretical and interpretive space that captures the moral, emotional, and intellectual labor of individuals striving for legitimacy in hierarchical societies. Javanese fiction, when read through this lens, reveals the subtle politics of recognition—how the desire to learn and to belong can both challenge and reaffirm established orders. Ultimately, this study argues that the *ngenger landscape* is not merely a theme within Javanese fiction but a symbolic structure through which cultural values are produced, negotiated, and reimagined in literature.

Literature Review

Ngenger as a Socio-Cultural Practice in Javanese Communities

The *ngenger* tradition occupies an essential place in Javanese cultural and social structures. It is often described as a practice in which a person from a lower social or economic background serves within the household of an upper-class family, not solely as labor but as an act of apprenticeship, education, and loyalty (Suliayati, 2021). In many rural communities, *ngenger* has historically represented a path for social mobility and moral learning rather than mere economic survival. The practice maintains a moral foundation rooted in reciprocity (*timbal balik*) and a sense of obligation that ties personal growth to communal values, positioning *ngenger* as a socio-cultural system of exchange within Javanese ethics (Koentjaraningrat, 1985; Magnis-Suseno, 1997).

Contemporary studies indicate that *ngenger* continues to evolve as an institution that mediates between social solidarity and structural inequality. Masduki et al. (2021) found that *ngenger* often introduces its participants to new ideological and religious frameworks, reshaping their moral and cultural orientations. This finding highlights the transformative nature of *ngenger* in shaping social consciousness beyond traditional servitude. The embedded moral discipline—obedience, humility, and service—forms an early socialization mechanism into hierarchical but educationally aspirational communities (Suliyati, 2021).

However, modern critiques have problematized *ngenger* as a potential site of gendered labor exploitation. Haryono (2024) observes that women engaged in *ngenger* relationships frequently face unequal power dynamics and diminished agency within households that enforce rigid moral expectations. These findings reveal that *ngenger*, while retaining its historical role as a conduit for education and refinement, simultaneously reproduces asymmetrical relationships and social dependency in contemporary Javanese society. Thus, *ngenger* emerges as a hybrid practice—bridging moral economy, labor relations, and identity formation within changing cultural landscapes.

Representation of Ngenger and Social Values in Javanese Fiction

In literary contexts, *ngenger* becomes a narrative device that mirrors the moral and hierarchical structures of Javanese society. Priyoto and Rahmadiani (2024) emphasize that literary texts such as Linus Suryadi AG's *Pengakuan Pariyem* encode moral vocabularies of *sungkan*, *alus*, and *nrimo*, all of which reflect a broader ethos of service, respectability, and restraint characteristic of the *ngenger* worldview. Through these symbolic codes, fiction not only preserves Javanese ethics but also critiques the tensions between obedience and agency within the socio-cultural order.

Recent literary analyses demonstrate how writers have reinterpreted *ngenger* within contemporary social critique. Damaryanti and Sayuti (2025) argue that modern Javanese fiction integrates *ngenger*-like dynamics—service, apprenticeship, and social ascent—into broader commentaries on inequality and transformation. These texts recast traditional practices within narratives of modernization, reflecting how cultural hierarchies persist under new forms of economic and moral aspiration. Thus, literary representations of *ngenger* serve as allegories of adaptation and resilience amid shifting social structures.

From an anthropological perspective, the *ngenger* motif in fiction provides insight into cultural continuity and contestation. Studies of contemporary Javanese novels reveal how authors use local cultural practices to construct moral geographies of belonging, conflict, and aspiration (Adi, 2025; Suharti, 2025). These works embed everyday cultural practices into narrative forms that critique modernity's encroachment on local identity. By treating *ngenger* as a symbolic practice of learning and becoming, literature transforms it into a metaphorical landscape of discipline, self-fashioning, and social negotiation.

Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory in Contemporary Research

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital remains a vital analytical lens for examining social reproduction in diverse contexts. Recent reviews reaffirm its relevance in understanding how class-based distinctions are reproduced through education, taste, and symbolic mastery (Hikmat, 2024). Cultural capital encompasses not only knowledge and aesthetic appreciation but also embodied behaviors that signify belonging within a given cultural field. This framework thus offers a powerful means of interpreting *ngenger* as a process of accumulating, performing, and legitimizing valued dispositions within a hierarchical system (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990).

Contemporary scholars have extended Bourdieu's theory to local educational and linguistic contexts. Puspitasari and Chaiyalerd (2025) demonstrate that cultural capital significantly affects students' linguistic performance and learning outcomes in higher education. Their study emphasizes how exposure to arts, cultural events, and elite linguistic registers enhances academic achievement. Applied to the *ngenger* context, this implies that participation in elite cultural spaces—through language, etiquette, and habitus—serves as a channel for acquiring symbolic capital that reshapes social status (Farhansyah et al., 2025).

At the same time, critiques of Bourdieu's framework urge contextualization within postcolonial and non-Western settings. Akhiruddin et al. (2025) contend that in Indonesia, family heritage and inherited values function as significant mediators of educational inequality. This insight resonates with the *ngenger* phenomenon, where intergenerational learning and cultural refinement reproduce both opportunity and dependency. By integrating Bourdieu's conceptual triad with Javanese moral

structures, the present study highlights how cultural capital is simultaneously a resource for social mobility and an instrument of symbolic domination within the *ngenger landscape*.

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative literary research design that integrates sociological criticism and cultural theory, drawing specifically on Pierre Bourdieu's framework of *habitus*, *field*, and *cultural capital*. The design aims to map the *ngenger landscape* as represented in selected Javanese fiction and to explore how literary narratives encode the processes through which characters acquire, negotiate, and convert cultural capital. The interpretive orientation of this study aligns with Bourdieu's perspective that literature operates as a "field of cultural production" where symbolic capital is generated and contested (Bourdieu, 1993). Therefore, rather than focusing merely on plot or character development, this study foregrounds the relational dynamics between knowledge, refinement, and class mobility as expressed through the practice of *ngenger* in fiction.

The approach is descriptive-interpretive, emphasizing close reading and contextual interpretation. This allows the researcher to uncover the implicit cultural codes, symbolic hierarchies, and moral economies that shape the representation of *ngenger*. Following Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative inquiry enables the exploration of meaning-making processes and contextual nuances within the texts, ensuring that findings reflect both the cultural specificity of Javanese society and the theoretical elasticity of Bourdieu's concepts. The study thus situates literary narratives within a broader sociocultural discourse, viewing fiction as both a reflection and reproduction of power relations.

Data Sources

The primary data of this research consist of six Indonesian novels published between 1980 and 2000 that explicitly foreground the construction of *ngenger* culture. The corpus was purposively selected to represent diverse strata of Javanese society—from the *priyayi* elite to rural working-class communities—and to capture the evolving meanings of *ngenger* within different historical and ideological contexts. The novels include: *Para Priyayi* (translated as *Javanese Gentry*) by Umar Kayam, *Canting* by Arswendo Atmowiloto, *Pengakuan Pariyem* (*Pariyem's Confession*) by Linus Suryadi, *Sekar* by Maria A. Sardjono, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (*The Dancer*) by Ahmad Tohari, and *Tirai Menurun* by N.H. Dini (see Table 1).

These novels were selected because they exemplify the narrative construction of cultural apprenticeship, moral obedience, and symbolic aspiration—elements that align with the logic of cultural capital accumulation. They also provide a comparative lens for examining how *ngenger* operates as a social metaphor across gender, class, and generational lines in postcolonial Indonesian fiction. The inclusion of English translations, where available, ensures accessibility and facilitates comparative interpretive engagement with international readers and scholars.

Table 1. Primary Data Corpus: Indonesian Novels (1980–2000)

No.	Title (Original / English Translation)	Author	Year of Publication
1	<i>Para Priyayi</i> (<i>Javanese Gentry</i>)	Umar Kayam	1992
2	<i>Canting</i>	Arswendo Atmowiloto	1986
3	<i>Pengakuan Pariyem</i> (<i>Pariyem's Confession</i>)	Linus Suryadi	1981
4	<i>Sekar</i>	Maria A. Sardjono	1983
5	<i>Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk</i> (<i>The Dancer</i>)	Ahmad Tohari	1982
6	<i>Tirai Menurun</i>	N.H. Dini	1979 / 1980s

The secondary data include scholarly articles, ethnographic writings, and theoretical works relevant to Bourdieu's sociology of culture and the anthropology of Javanese society. These materials serve as interpretive scaffolds for situating textual findings within broader academic discussions on class, refinement, and symbolic exchange (Suliyati, 2021; Hikmat, 2024; Adi, 2025).

Data Collection

The data collection procedure employed **documentary analysis**, focusing on literary texts as socio-symbolic artifacts. Each novel was subjected to close reading and selective coding to identify linguistic expressions, character interactions, and narrative situations that manifest elements of *ngenger* culture. Particular attention was given to scenes of apprenticeship, domestic service, mentorship, and

moral negotiation that reflect the acquisition of cultural capital within hierarchical relationships. Textual data were systematically organized using thematic coding categories inspired by Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital conversion: (1) embodied cultural capital (e.g., refinement, etiquette, and speech style), (2) institutionalized capital (e.g., education and credentials), and objectified capital (e.g., possessions symbolizing class and status). Secondary data from ethnographic studies (Suliyati, 2021; Haryono, 2024) and recent literary analyses (Suharti, 2025) were incorporated to triangulate findings and contextualize cultural practices within real-world Javanese social systems. This triangulation strengthens validity and enhances interpretive depth by bridging fictional representation and cultural reality.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through Miles and Huberman's (2014) interactive qualitative analysis model, consisting of three major stages: *data condensation*, *data display*, and *conclusion drawing/verification*. During data condensation, textual excerpts referring to *ngenger* were extracted, coded, and grouped into conceptual clusters such as "education and apprenticeship," "obedience and symbolic exchange," and "mobility and legitimacy." In the data display stage, thematic matrices were developed to compare how each novel portrays the relationship between service and self-cultivation, allowing the identification of recurring motifs and variations across the corpus. The interpretive synthesis was then conducted through the theoretical lens of Bourdieu's (1993) *field of cultural production* and his notion of *cultural capital*. This framework was used to interpret how *ngenger* operates as a symbolic mechanism of capital accumulation—where obedience, linguistic mastery, and refinement serve as currencies of recognition. The analysis also explored how these literary representations challenge or reinforce class structures by dramatizing the conversion of moral virtue into social mobility. In this sense, *ngenger* becomes not merely a narrative motif but a discursive field reflecting the reproduction and negotiation of symbolic power in Javanese modernity.

Findings

Overview of the Ngenger Landscape in Javanese Fiction

The six novels under study collectively construct a nuanced *ngenger landscape*—a symbolic terrain in which education, obedience, and moral discipline intersect with aspirations for social mobility. Across different narrative worlds, *ngenger* emerges not as a singular social role but as a complex system of cultural apprenticeship. Characters who undergo *ngenger* occupy liminal positions between dependence and agency, tradition and modernity, subordination and aspiration. (See Table 1)

Table 2. Comparative Map of the Ngenger Landscape Across the Six Novels

No	Novel	Central Ngenger Figure	Socio-Cultural Context	Dominant Theme
1	<i>Para Priyayi</i> (Umar Kayam)	Sastrodarsono	Rise from rural <i>abdi</i> to educated <i>priyayi</i>	Education as symbolic capital
2	<i>Canting</i> (Arswendo Atmowiloto)	Nyai Rono	Family heritage of servitude and entrepreneurship	Transition of class and habitus
3	<i>Pengakuan Pariyem</i> (Linus Suryadi)	Pariyem	Domestic servant of <i>priyayi</i> household	Gendered obedience and symbolic violence
4	<i>Sekar</i> (Maria A. Sardjono)	Sekar	Teacher's apprentice	Moral discipline and social imitation
5	<i>Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk</i> (Ahmad Tohari)	Srintil	Performer shaped by patronage system	Cultural labor and embodied capital
6	<i>Tirai Menurun</i> (N.H. Dini)	Sri and her kin	Urban adaptation of moral codes	Negotiating freedom and propriety

This comparative matrix indicates that *ngenger* in Javanese fiction functions as both a social institution and a symbolic device. Each narrative encodes the transformation of *habitus*—the embodied dispositions through which individuals internalize class behavior and values. The *ngenger* condition becomes a field in which cultural capital is learned, performed, and converted into recognition or legitimacy.

Embodied Cultural Capital: Refinement, Obedience, and Linguistic Mastery

Bourdieu classifies embodied cultural capital as durable dispositions acquired through long-term socialization. In *ngenger* fiction, this dimension is most evident in the refinement of speech (*basa krama*), bodily comportment, and obedience to authority. These characteristics distinguish *ngenger* subjects from their rural origins, signaling entry into the world of *priyayi* civility. (See Table 2)

Table 3. Embodied Cultural Capital in the Ngenger Landscape

Novel	Manifestation of Embodied Capital	Narrative Function
<i>Para Priyayi</i>	Sastrodarsono's transformation from servant to teacher through mastery of <i>basa krama</i> and etiquette.	Cultural ascent and internalized discipline.
<i>Pengakuan Pariyem</i>	Pariyem's soft-spoken humility and "ritualized silence" signify respectability and virtue.	Embodied subservience as moral identity.
<i>Canting</i>	Nyai Rono transmits politeness and perseverance to her children as heritage.	Continuity of class-coded behavior.

In *Para Priyayi*, Sastrodarsono's journey from a *ngenger* boy to an educated bureaucrat exemplifies Bourdieu's idea of the conversion of embodied dispositions into institutionalized capital (education). His linguistic self-discipline mirrors the *habitus* of the *priyayi* elite, achieved through imitation rather than inheritance. Similarly, Pariyem's monologue in *Pengakuan Pariyem* dramatizes how the body itself becomes a site of symbolic control. Her restraint in speech and gesture transforms subordination into a moral virtue—a subtle form of what Bourdieu terms "symbolic violence," where domination is internalized as devotion.

In these narratives, the aesthetic of obedience and grace (*alus*) becomes both the goal and proof of successful enculturation. The characters' bodily comportment signifies their assimilation into elite cultural codes while simultaneously reinforcing the legitimacy of hierarchical order. This duality reflects the ambivalence of cultural capital: it enables social ascent but also reproduces symbolic inequality.

Institutionalized Cultural Capital: Education, Profession, and Legitimacy

Institutionalized capital in Bourdieu's sense refers to officially recognized credentials—degrees, positions, or titles—that confer legitimacy. In Javanese fiction, *ngenger* characters use education as a vehicle to institutionalize their acquired dispositions. The transformation from domestic dependency to professional achievement becomes a recurrent narrative trajectory. (See Table 3)

Table 4. Institutionalized Cultural Capital

Novel	Form of Institutionalized Capital	Social Outcome
<i>Para Priyayi</i>	Western-style education; teaching certificate.	Transition to bureaucratic elite.
<i>Sekar</i>	Formal teacher training.	Social mobility through education.
<i>Tirai Menurun</i>	Urban schooling and modern domesticity.	Rearticulation of women's moral authority.

Education serves as the most visible path for converting cultural capital into institutional recognition. In *Sekar*, Sardjono (1983) portrays her protagonist as a young woman whose commitment to teaching reflects an internalization of *priyayi* discipline. Her success is not simply personal but symbolic of a class transition mediated by moral cultivation. Similarly, *Tirai Menurun* (Dini, 1980) recontextualizes *ngenger* values within urban modernity, where the pursuit of education redefines femininity from servitude to self-determination.

However, these narratives also reveal contradictions: education promises freedom yet demands conformity. As Puspitasari and Chaiyalerd (2025) note, cultural capital can sustain inequality by privileging those who already possess the linguistic and behavioral competencies valued by the

dominant class. Thus, while the characters' achievements illustrate empowerment, they remain contingent upon adherence to existing hierarchies of taste and decorum.

Objectified and Symbolic Capital: Material Culture, Patronage, and Recognition

Beyond personal cultivation and formal education, *ngenger* narratives also depict the material and symbolic dimensions of cultural capital. The objects associated with refinement—books, musical instruments, clothing, and domestic spaces—function as tangible signs of accumulated distinction. (See Table 4)

Table 5. Objectified and Symbolic Capital: Material Signs, Cultural Objects, and Patronage Mechanisms

Novel	Object / Symbol	Function of Objectified Capital
<i>Canting</i>	Batik motifs and family heirlooms.	Materialization of lineage and artistic prestige.
<i>Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk</i>	Dance costumes and performance rituals.	Embodiment of community identity and patronage.
<i>Para Priyayi</i>	School building, furniture, writing tools.	Institutional markers of achievement.

In *Canting*, Atmowiloto (1986) constructs the Rono family's batik enterprise as both an economic and symbolic enterprise. The *canting*—a tool for creating batik—becomes an allegory for cultural craftsmanship, blending labor, artistry, and identity. The transmission of batik motifs parallels the inheritance of *habitus*, illustrating how material culture reproduces class consciousness. Meanwhile, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (Tohari, 1982) offers a rural inversion: Srintil's body itself is objectified as cultural capital through dance, patronage, and eroticized performance. Her artistry elevates her social status yet binds her within patriarchal patronage systems.

Bourdieu (1993) conceptualizes such dynamics as the “economy of symbolic goods,” where recognition and prestige circulate as currencies of exchange. In these novels, symbolic capital manifests in the form of reputation, refinement, and public esteem. Yet this symbolic economy remains gendered and class-specific. Female characters like Pariyem and Srintil embody the paradox of being both valued and constrained by their symbolic capital—admired for grace yet denied autonomy (Haryono, 2024).

Thematic Synthesis: Reproduction and Resistance in the Ngenger Landscape

Across the six novels, *ngenger* functions as a discursive metaphor for the reproduction of social order and the subtle resistances embedded within it. The *ngenger landscape* represents a continuum of apprenticeship, education, and negotiation through which Javanese individuals navigate symbolic hierarchies. Table 3 summarizes this dialectic.

Table 6. Synthesis of Reproduction and Resistance in the Ngenger Landscape

Dimension	Reproductive Function	Resistant Function	Illustrative Text
Moral Discipline	Reinforces obedience and hierarchy.	Transforms subordination into moral virtue.	<i>Pengakuan Pariyem</i>
Education	Institutionalizes elite habitus.	Enables limited social mobility.	<i>Para Priyayi, Sekar</i>
Gender	Perpetuates domestic subservience.	Allows subtle agency through affective labor.	<i>Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk, Tirai Menurun</i>
Material Culture	Embodies heritage and lineage.	Re-signifies artistry as self-expression.	<i>Canting</i>

The findings reveal that *ngenger* is not a static institution but a symbolic process—one that simultaneously sustains and contests the logic of hierarchy. Through Bourdieu's lens, these texts illuminate the cyclical nature of cultural capital: what appears as social ascent often culminates in the re-legitimation of established structures. Yet within these cycles, fiction carves spaces of introspection and critique. The quiet endurance of Pariyem, the artistic agency of Srintil, and the educational ambition of Sekar all represent alternative modes of negotiating domination.

Furthermore, the *ngenger landscape* exemplifies what Adi (2025) calls “symbolic survival”—the preservation of cultural values through adaptation rather than resistance. The persistence of humility, refinement, and respectability within changing modern contexts illustrates how *habitus* evolves without

rupture. Fiction thus becomes a field where *ngenger* is reimagined not merely as servitude but as a pedagogy of character, a moral technology of survival within stratified societies.

Table 7. Summary of Key Findings and Bourdieusian Interpretations

Analytical Focus	Major Insight	Theoretical Link
Embodied Capital	Ngenger characters embody refinement through speech and demeanor, demonstrating learned habitus.	Bourdieu's embodied capital as internalized class culture.
Institutionalized Capital	Education legitimizes social ascent but preserves class taste and symbolic control.	Institutionalization of habitus (Bourdieu, 1986).
Objectified Capital	Material and artistic symbols (batik, dance) encode social prestige and moral continuity.	Symbolic economy of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993).
Gender and Power	Female ngenger figures embody both virtue and constraint, turning obedience into moral capital.	Symbolic violence and gendered habitus (Bourdieu, 2001).
Narrative Function	Literature reimagines ngenger as both reproduction and critique of social order.	Field of cultural production as reflexive arena.

Discussion

The analysis of six Indonesian novels reveals that *ngenger* is not a mere remnant of Javanese feudalism, but a living cultural metaphor that mediates social aspiration, education, and moral formation. Within the *ngenger landscape*, characters navigate structural hierarchies while pursuing symbolic recognition through refinement (*alus*), linguistic mastery, and obedience. This dynamic affirms Bourdieu's notion that cultural capital functions as both an instrument of empowerment and a mechanism of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; Darmawan, 2024). At the same time, these fictional worlds resonate with contemporary Indonesian realities, where education and cultural adaptation continue to shape the habitus of social mobility (Roekhan, 2020; Pratiwi & Nurhadi, 2021).

Ngenger as a Field of Cultural Reproduction

In Bourdieu's (1993) *field of cultural production*, literature itself operates as a social arena where symbolic power circulates. The *ngenger* narratives in *Para Priyayi*, *Canting*, and *Pengakuan Pariyem* represent this field in microcosm—spaces where education, discipline, and obedience become forms of symbolic capital. The servant-turned-teacher Sastrodarsono (*Para Priyayi*) and the devoted domestic figure Pariyem embody the transformation of cultural capital into moral legitimacy. This reflects the way Javanese social structures intertwine virtue with subordination. As Suliyati (2021) notes, *ngenger* historically functioned not only as economic dependency but as a pedagogical process, transmitting behavioral refinement and loyalty as cultural values.

However, the fictional portrayal also critiques the moral economy sustaining these relations. Characters internalize hierarchy as a virtue, performing what Bourdieu (1991) calls *symbolic violence*—a form of domination accepted as moral order. In *Pengakuan Pariyem*, for instance, self-restraint and linguistic grace are valorized, but they conceal a deeper asymmetry of power. This aligns with Yuni Pratiwi's (2022) findings that Javanese politeness and deference often reinforce gendered subordination, even when presented as cultural harmony. The novels therefore stage an ethical tension: refinement functions as moral and aesthetic capital, but also as the means through which inequality is normalized.

Education, Habitus, and Institutional Legitimacy

Education emerges as the primary means of converting cultural capital into institutional recognition. In *Sekar* and *Para Priyayi*, formal schooling transforms *ngenger* characters into respectable citizens—a process mirroring Indonesia's broader narrative of education as social salvation (Roekhan, 2020; Yuni Pratiwi, 2021). Bourdieu's (1986) theory suggests that institutionalized capital legitimizes pre-existing cultural distinctions by rewarding those whose habitus aligns with institutional expectations. The novels dramatize this: Sastrodarsono's success depends on mastering the elite's linguistic and moral codes, not merely on academic merit.

Recent studies in Indonesian education echo this dynamic. Roekhan (2020) argues that classroom culture and teacher discourse reproduce linguistic hierarchies that privilege *basa krama* users as "refined." Similarly, Pratiwi and Nurhadi (2021) highlight that schooling in Javanese regions continues to value conformity and courtesy—echoing *ngenger*'s moral pedagogy. In fiction, these dispositions

function as invisible capital; by embodying respect, patience, and *tata krama*, characters gain recognition, illustrating Bourdieu's (1990) argument that symbolic mastery often outweighs technical competence.

Gendered Habitus and Symbolic Violence

Female characters in *ngenger* narratives face a double bind: their moral refinement grants symbolic respect yet limits autonomy. *Pengakuan Pariyem* and *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* articulate what Haryono (2024) calls "gendered servitude," where women's virtue is socially valuable but personally constraining. The domestic body becomes both the site of cultural transmission and subjection. Yuni Pratiwi (2023) found similar patterns in her discourse analysis of Javanese female representation, showing that women's linguistic politeness operates as a moral façade masking unequal power relations.

From a Bourdieusian view, such dynamics exemplify *symbolic violence*—domination masked as affection or propriety. Pariyem's submission is narratively celebrated as *ngabekti* (devotion), yet structurally it reinforces male and class authority. Likewise, Srintil's artistry in *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* converts her body into cultural capital for her community but subjects her to patriarchal patronage. These portrayals echo global feminist reinterpretations of Bourdieu that explore how gender mediates the acquisition and use of cultural capital (Adkins, 2004; McNay, 2020). Thus, Javanese fiction transforms *ngenger* into a gendered discourse of habitus, where virtue and vulnerability coexist.

Material and Symbolic Capital in Cultural Production

In *Canting* and *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, artistic and material objects function as repositories of objectified capital. Batik motifs, heirlooms, and dance rituals encode class lineage and community identity. As Atmowiloto (1986) illustrates, the *canting*—a batik tool—symbolizes craftsmanship, lineage, and perseverance, transforming labor into art. This resonates with Bourdieu's (1993) view that cultural goods materialize distinction through form and ritual. These novels show that material culture in Javanese life carries symbolic weight as moral capital—a pattern also noted by Pratiwi (2023), who observed that local art education reinforces intergenerational transmission of cultural values as social identity.

However, symbolic accumulation remains stratified. While the *priyayi* preserve their prestige through refined possessions and artistic taste, rural characters use art for survival. This divide mirrors current socio-cultural studies showing that Indonesian communities employ cultural expression both for survival and social differentiation (Utomo & Suharti, 2024). Fiction thereby reproduces the dual logic of capital: culture humanizes hierarchy even as it legitimizes it.

Ngenger as Moral Economy and Social Critique

Despite its feudal origins, *ngenger* in these novels operates as a **moral economy** that fuses virtue with necessity. Characters' loyalty and discipline embody values still embedded in Indonesian educational and social ethos—respect, responsibility, and *andhap asor* (humility). Suliyati (2021) demonstrated that even in modern settings, *ngenger* persists as a form of moral apprenticeship in rural communities, where service provides access to informal education. Similarly, Yuni Pratiwi (2024) found that language teaching in Javanese schools continues to use cultural exemplars that echo *ngenger*'s ethos of devotion and self-restraint.

Yet, literature also introduces self-reflexive critique. Dini's *Tirai Menurun* repositions these virtues in urban modernity, showing that obedience and refinement can become burdens in bureaucratic and patriarchal institutions. The tension between aspiration and dependency mirrors what Bourdieu (1990) calls the *double bind* of habitus: actors pursue mobility but remain bound by inherited cultural logics. Thus, fiction becomes a dialogic space where tradition is both revered and interrogated.

The Ngenger Landscape as a Metaphor of Indonesian Modernity

When viewed collectively, the six novels construct *ngenger* as a metaphor for Indonesia's broader negotiation between tradition and modernity. Each narrative dramatizes the transformation of feudal servitude into modern professionalism, of inherited virtue into cultivated discipline. This transformation parallels Roekhan's (2022) observation that contemporary Indonesian fiction often reworks traditional motifs to critique modernization's moral costs. Through Bourdieu's framework, the *ngenger landscape* represents the field where inherited *habitus* meets new structures of opportunity, generating hybrid moral economies that sustain the continuity of Javanese values amid changing institutions.

Furthermore, *ngenger* exemplifies what Pratiwi (2025) calls “cultural persistence through symbolic adaptation”—a phenomenon where traditional ethics are preserved not through repetition but through reinterpretation in modern contexts. Fiction thus performs both conservation and transformation: it memorializes *ngenger* as moral capital while reshaping it into a metaphor for identity, education, and belonging. In this way, Javanese literature participates in what Bourdieu (1993) terms the *autonomization of the cultural field*—a process where art reproduces and contests its own social conditions.

From a theoretical standpoint, the *ngenger landscape* encapsulates the triadic operation of *habitus*, *capital*, and *field*. Embodied dispositions such as *tata krama* and *andhap asor* form the habitus that structures behavior; educational attainment and recognition institutionalize capital; while symbolic prestige defines success within the cultural field. Yet these same mechanisms perpetuate inequality by rewarding conformity. The novels’ ambivalence—oscillating between admiration and critique—demonstrates that cultural capital is both transformative and reproductive.

As Roekhan (2021) asserts, Indonesian literary education should be understood not merely as textual interpretation but as moral cultivation rooted in lived culture. The *ngenger* narratives affirm this view: literature becomes an ethical pedagogy where refinement, discipline, and devotion are learned through stories that mirror social realities. Thus, *ngenger* in fiction is neither archaic nor obsolete; it is a cultural grammar of perseverance that continues to inform Indonesian identity in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

This study concludes that *ngenger* in Javanese fiction functions less as a simple marker of servitude and more as a cultural landscape of apprenticeship, aspiration, and symbolic negotiation. Across the six novels, *ngenger* is consistently represented as a pathway through which characters learn refinement, discipline, and social codes that shape how they are recognized within stratified environments. The findings show that the *ngenger* landscape operates through three connected forms of cultural capital. First, embodied dispositions (e.g., language registers, etiquette, self-restraint) become visible markers of legitimacy. Second, institutional pathways (e.g., schooling, professional status) formalize those dispositions into socially recognized credentials. Third, material and cultural forms (e.g., batik tools, ritual objects, performance practices) store and display cultural value. Together, these mechanisms illustrate how cultural capital is accumulated and converted into recognition, while also revealing the limits of mobility when recognition remains dependent on dominant norms.

At the same time, the novels expose the ambivalence of *ngenger*. It can enable self-making through learning and social access, yet it can also reproduce inequality by framing obedience and restraint as moral virtue. This tension is especially apparent in gendered portrayals, where feminine refinement often yields symbolic esteem but restricts autonomy. Overall, the *ngenger* landscape in Javanese fiction provides a useful lens for understanding how cultural values persist and adapt under modern conditions. Literature emerges as a space where tradition is preserved, reinterpreted, and sometimes contested, allowing *ngenger* to be read as both an archive of social hierarchy and a narrative arena for negotiating dignity, belonging, and aspiration.

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