



Analyzing Human Rights Discourse in The Context of Postmodern and Postcolonial Perspectives (A Case Study of Indigenous Rights in Australia)

Sunny Ummul Firdaus and Muhammad Aldi Fathurrahman*

Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia
muhammadaldifathurra@student.uns.ac.id

Abstract. This study explores the discourse of human rights in the context of postmodern and postcolonial perspectives, focusing on the case of Indigenous rights in Australia. Indigenous Australians have been marginalized, with their rights often overlooked within national policies influenced by colonial legacies. The postmodern perspective questions the universality of human rights, suggesting that they are socially constructed and influenced by cultural and political contexts. Meanwhile, postcolonial theory examines the enduring impacts of colonialism on Indigenous populations, exposing the systemic injustices and power imbalances that persist in modern legal and social systems. The study analyzes how Indigenous rights have been framed within dominant Western human rights discourses and the implications of these frameworks for Indigenous Australians. The findings reveal that the human rights of Indigenous Australians are often constrained by Western legal and social constructs, which fail to fully account for Indigenous cultural contexts and historical grievances. The study concludes that Indigenous rights in Australia must be re-conceptualized through a lens that challenges colonial structures and incorporates Indigenous voices in the broader human rights discourse.

Keywords: Australia, Indigenous Rights, Postcolonialism, Postmodernism.

1 Introduction

The issue of human rights has grown increasingly complex and remains a highly debated topic worldwide. Traditional views that perceive human rights as a universal set of values have been criticized by various perspectives, particularly postmodernism and postcolonialism. Postmodernism challenges overarching assumptions about universal truths and objectivity, suggesting that human rights are not absolute but rather shaped by specific cultural, historical, and social contexts. Postcolonialism, on the other hand, explores how the legacies of colonialism continue to influence power dynamics, affecting the interpretation and implementation of human rights in many postcolonial societies. This perspective highlights how human rights frameworks are often intertwined with historical inequalities rooted in colonial dominance. [1]

In Australia, the human rights debate becomes especially significant when examined through postmodern and postcolonial lenses, as the country has a deep colonial history

that has left lasting impacts on its Indigenous populations. Indigenous Australians have long fought for recognition of their rights, encompassing land, cultural, and political rights, yet they continue to face systemic marginalization. A postcolonial approach offers valuable insights into how colonial history persists in affecting the lives of Indigenous Australians, shaping the legal and social frameworks that impact their communities today. This perspective reveals the need to address human rights issues in a way that acknowledges colonial histories and adapts to the distinct cultural and social needs of Indigenous people. [1]

In postcolonial studies, Indigenous rights are often viewed as part of a broader struggle for self-determination and decolonization. In Australia, this concept has been central to Indigenous political movements since the 1970s. Organizations such as the Aboriginal Legal Service and the Aboriginal Medical Service have been instrumental in this ongoing struggle, advocating for Indigenous communities to gain autonomy over their social, political, and economic matters. The postcolonial perspective frames this movement not simply as a demand for individual rights, but as a collective endeavor by Indigenous peoples to reclaim control over their futures, independent from the colonial state's influence. [2]

Postmodernism also provides valuable insights into the discourse on human rights, particularly by questioning the idea of universal rights as a dominant narrative. It argues that the experiences and needs of Indigenous Australians cannot be effectively addressed through generalized human rights frameworks. Instead, their unique and context-specific experiences—deeply shaped by a history of colonialism—demand a nuanced approach. Postmodernism thus highlights the relative nature of human rights, advocating for rights that are responsive to the distinct cultural and historical realities of different communities rather than a one-size-fits-all model. Together, these perspectives urge a more inclusive and contextually sensitive approach to Indigenous rights, seeking justice that aligns with their specific needs and experiences. [2]

The postcolonial perspective is also critical in understanding how colonial history continues to shape human rights policies and practices in Australia. While the Australian government has made some progress in recognizing Indigenous rights, such as through land rights recognition, many challenges remain. For instance, government policies often fail to address the specific needs of Indigenous communities, particularly in areas like healthcare, education, and housing. The postcolonial framework allows us to see how these policies are often paternalistic and overlook Indigenous peoples' right to determine their own needs. A postmodern and postcolonial analysis of human rights in Australia helps us understand the complexities of Indigenous struggles. Their rights cannot be viewed merely as issues of equality or economic justice but as part of a broader fight for self-determination and the recognition of their unique cultural identity. [2]

2 Methodology

This research adopts a normative legal methodology, focusing on the examination of secondary data from prior studies related to Indigenous rights in Australia, analyzed through postmodern and postcolonial lenses. The methodology centers on reviewing legal texts, statutory provisions, and case law to understand how human rights discourse

is shaped by cultural, social, and political factors, particularly in the context of marginalized Indigenous communities. The research aims to elucidate how Indigenous rights are framed within legal frameworks and how they are impacted by historical and contemporary power dynamics by analyzing these legal materials. The study draws on a range of legal sources, including key legal documents such as the Native Title Act 1993 (Cth) and the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (Cth), as well as relevant case law and academic analyses. This normative approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the legal recognition and protection of Indigenous rights, highlighting the influence of colonial legacies and power structures on these processes.

3 Discussion

3.1 Historical Context of Indigenous Rights in Australia: Colonial Legacies and Modern Challenges

The historical context of Indigenous rights in Australia is deeply influenced by colonial legacies that continue to shape the socio-economic and political realities of Indigenous peoples. Colonization, which began in 1788, resulted in the dispossession and marginalization of Indigenous Australians, as their traditional lands were seized without treaties or compensation. Early colonial policies aimed at exclusion and assimilation disrupted Indigenous communities, leading to the erosion of cultural practices and a loss of autonomy. Today, the legacy of these policies remains evident, with the struggle for land rights and self-determination still at the heart of Indigenous advocacy. [3]

The forced displacement of Aboriginal peoples from their lands and the imposition of European legal and political frameworks have created enduring inequalities. Many Indigenous Australians were confined to urban areas, such as Redfern, where they faced harsh socio-economic conditions, including inadequate housing and restricted access to welfare benefits until the 1960s. These historical injustices have had lasting consequences, as Indigenous Australians continue to experience disproportionately high rates of poverty, poor health outcomes, and inadequate housing compared to non-Indigenous Australians. The effects of these colonial practices underscore the need for sustained efforts toward justice and equality. [3]

The pursuit of Indigenous self-determination in Australia is closely connected to global movements for decolonization and civil rights. The Aboriginal movement in Australia has often paralleled the Black Power movement in the United States, as both aimed to challenge systems of racial oppression and advocate for the rights of marginalized groups. Through this lens, the Aboriginal movement becomes part of a broader, international effort toward justice and equality, a struggle that persists today as Indigenous Australians continue to demand recognition of their land rights and cultural sovereignty. [4]

Although Indigenous activists made significant advances in the 1970s, colonial legacies remain a profound challenge for Indigenous Australians. The quest for self-determination is ongoing, with many Indigenous communities still confronting systemic obstacles to equality in areas such as education, healthcare, and employment.

The entrenched socio-economic disparities rooted in dispossession and marginalization are difficult to overcome without substantial structural changes in Australia's approach to Indigenous rights. This complex history underscores the need for comprehensive reforms to address long-standing inequalities and support genuine progress for Indigenous Australians. [4]

3.2 Postmodern Critique of Universal Human Rights: Relativism and the Indigenous Experience

The postmodern critique of universal human rights is grounded in the concept of relativism, especially when viewed through the lens of Indigenous experiences. This critique stresses the importance of cultural and contextual nuances, challenging the universalist assumptions underlying many human rights frameworks. Modern societies often reinforce structures of inequality by promoting a sense of superiority over Indigenous cultures. Universal human rights frameworks, which largely reflect Western ideals, frequently overlook the cultural diversity and lived experiences of Indigenous communities. This oversight creates a fundamental tension between universalism and relativism, as the imposition of a standardized set of rights, shaped by globalization, further marginalizes Indigenous societies by ignoring their unique cultural and historical contexts. [5]

This perspective aligns with the broader postmodern rejection of overarching narratives, including the notion that human rights can be universally applied without regard for local specificities. Postmodernism questions the dominance of a single, universal truth and instead advocates for multiple perspectives—an essential approach when considering Indigenous rights within global human rights discourses. By rejecting universalism and embracing cultural particularities, postmodernism offers a framework that respects the diversity of Indigenous identities and challenges the idea of one-size-fits-all human rights. [6]

The anthropological debate surrounding universalism and cultural relativism has long recognized the challenges of applying universal human rights to culturally diverse societies. There are critiques the search for a “middle ground” between these two positions, suggesting that such attempts are inherently flawed. Indigenous experiences exemplify the difficulty of reconciling universal human rights with cultural relativism, as their traditional values and social structures often conflict with the Western human rights paradigm. This divergence reveals the inadequacies of universal human rights frameworks in addressing the specific needs and perspectives of indigenous populations. [7] Evans (2016) expands on this critique by examining how the concept of universal human rights is often tied to hegemonic narratives that promote a singular, global identity. This narrative disregards the complexities of indigenous identities, which are deeply embedded in local histories, languages, and customs. The imposition of a universal human rights regime on indigenous communities can thus be seen as a form of cultural imperialism, where the globalized human rights discourse erases the particularities of indigenous existence. [8]

Postmodernism, in its critique of universalism, highlights the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach to human rights. The lived experiences of indigenous peoples, who often face systemic oppression and marginalization, reveal the failure of universal human rights to adequately address the realities of those outside the dominant Western

framework. [5] This critique is further supported by the idea that modern societies maintain control by forcing individuals, including indigenous peoples, to adopt identities that conform to Western ideals of civilization and rights. The postmodern critique also challenges the assumption that human rights can be detached from the socio-historical contexts in which they are applied. [8] As Yousef (2017) argues, postmodernism brings to light the ways in which modernist ideals, including universal human rights, are grounded in specific historical and cultural contexts that do not necessarily translate across all societies. For indigenous communities, whose social, political, and economic systems often operate on entirely different principles, the imposition of universal human rights can be not only inappropriate but also damaging to their autonomy and cultural survival.

3.3 The Role of Self-Determination in Indigenous Rights: A Postcolonial and Postmodern Analysis

The role of self-determination in Indigenous rights holds a central place in both postcolonial and postmodern discourses, especially as these frameworks interrogate historical power dynamics and the decolonization of knowledge. Indigenous self-determination is fundamentally about the right of Indigenous peoples to govern their own affairs, free from external control, which can be understood in light of postcolonial critiques of sovereignty and authority. Within a postcolonial framework, self-determination is seen as an assertion of autonomy in the face of colonial legacies that sought to suppress Indigenous agency and culture. Self-determination embodies a rejection of colonial domination and a reassertion of Indigenous sovereignty and cultural integrity. Postmodern theory adds a layer of complexity to the discussion of Indigenous self-determination by challenging traditional, linear narratives of history and sovereignty. [1] The fragmented and decentralized nature of power, as suggested by postmodern thinkers, parallels Indigenous concepts of governance, which often emphasize community-based decision-making rather than centralized state control. [9]

This approach aligns with the argument that Indigenous peoples' rights are not merely a political matter but are deeply tied to their cultural practices and values, which postmodern analysis would regard as being equally legitimate as any Western notions of governance. [10] This dichotomy reflects the postcolonial critique of state-led initiatives that frame Indigenous rights through the lens of paternalism, rather than as a recognition of inherent sovereignty.

Marshall's (2014) examination of Aboriginal water rights highlights another dimension of self-determination, where Indigenous relationships with natural resources are framed within their own cultural and legal systems. Aboriginal water values, grounded in ancestral rights, stand in contrast to the Western commodification of water. This divergence underscores the postcolonial struggle to reconcile Indigenous ontologies with the imposed colonial legal frameworks that continue to govern land and resource use. Indigenous self-determination in this context involves reclaiming control over resources that are integral to their cultural and spiritual well-being, a form of governance that reflects their distinct worldview. [11]

The comparison of customary land law in Indonesia and Aboriginal land rights in Australia reveals significant insights into the role of self-determination within the context of indigenous rights. Customary land laws, or *hukum tanah adat*, remain a

crucial aspect of land transactions in Indonesia despite the overarching presence of national agrarian laws as outlined in Law No. 5 of 1960. These traditional laws govern land use and ownership within specific regions, reflecting local customs and practices. This interaction between traditional and national legal frameworks provides a rich context for examining the role of self-determination in indigenous land rights. [12]

Land plays a strategic role in both Indonesian adat law and Aboriginal culture. In Indonesian customary law, land is not merely a physical asset but holds significant social and religious value. Land is integral to personal dignity, welfare, and spiritual values. Similarly, for Aboriginal Australians, land is deeply embedded in cultural and spiritual practices. The concept of The Dreaming encompasses a holistic view of land, linking past, present, and future through ancestral connections. This profound connection illustrates how land serves as more than a resource; it embodies cultural identity and continuity. [13]

4 Conclusion

The analysis of human rights discourse through postmodern and postcolonial lenses reveals the complex dynamics surrounding Indigenous rights in Australia. From a postmodern perspective, human rights are not seen as universal truths but are shaped by cultural, historical, and political contexts, highlighting the fragmented and contested nature of these rights. In the case of Indigenous Australians, their rights have historically been marginalized or ignored within the broader national narrative, reflecting power imbalances rooted in colonial legacies. Postcolonial theory helps uncover these layers of oppression, exposing how colonialism has continued to influence legal and social frameworks, contributing to the ongoing struggles of Indigenous communities for recognition, justice, and equality. The study reveals that Indigenous rights are often framed within Western constructs of human rights, which may not fully address the specific needs and cultural realities of Indigenous peoples by utilizing a qualitative methodology that draws on secondary data from previous research. This analysis highlights the importance of deconstructing dominant narratives and advocating for a more inclusive, culturally sensitive approach to human rights that acknowledges Indigenous perspectives and historical injustices. The discourse surrounding Indigenous rights in Australia must evolve beyond colonial frameworks to truly address the legacies of colonialism and foster a more equitable future.

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