

A LIFE FREE FROM TRAMMELS: SOEWARSIH DJOJOPESPITO AND HER NOVEL *BUITEN HET GAREEL*

Gerard Termorshuizen
University of Leyden

The Indonesian writer Soewarsih Djojopoespito became known in the Netherlands through her novel *Buiten het gareel*, which appeared in 1940.¹ Her book contains the strongly autobiographical record of the experiences of a young married couple working at nationalist schools in several towns in Java. In Soelastri, the character through whose eyes we witness the events narrated, we recognize Soewarsih herself; in Soedarmo she depicts a portrait of her husband Soegondo. Both Soewarsih and Soegondo Djojopoespito belonged to the group of western educated young Indonesians, who preferred working for the education and improvement of their own people to a reasonably well paid job in a government school. This choice meant an uncertain existence which led to many disappointments and often made them doubt whether the ideals they cherished could be realized. Living in bitter poverty most of the time, this group formed an intellectual proletariat in whose lives the nationalist movement had occupied a major place even while they were still students.

It becomes clear from the -- unpublished-- reminiscences of her youth how much this applied to Soewarsih Djojopoespito.² In her memoirs she looks back to the first eighteen years of her life and describes the difficulties which a simple desa-girl had to face, before she could work for her people.

Soewarsih (her family and friends called her Tjitjih) was born in 1912 in the desa Tjibatok, some twenty kilometres south-west of Buitenzorg (the present-day Bogor), on the main road to Bantam. She was the third of six children of a mixed marriage between Raden Bagoes Noersaid

Djojosapoetro, a descendant from the Tjirebon dynasty, and Hatidjah whose family were rich Chinese who had converted to Islam. Thanks to their wealthy Chinese grandparents, Soewarsih and her brothers and sisters had a carefree childhood. The mother was a gentle, somewhat shy woman who remained in the shadow of her much older husband, who liked to play the grand seigneur, but at the same time proved to be a bad administrator of the business capital entrusted to him by his father-in-law. He occupied a leading position in the desa community on account of his abilities and education. Adventurous by nature, he had seen much more of Java than the small Tjibatok, where he settled later. He was a gripping story-teller and a talented *dalang* who used to give performances with his own puppets. Coming from a family which attached great importance to education and learning, he used the prestige of his aristocratic background to gain places for his children at schools in Buitenzorg, where western education was provided. The fact that in doing so he treated his sons and daughters equally -- "progress lies in the hands of woman", he declared in his desa-- was characteristic of his advanced outlook.

The so-called 'ethical movement' at the beginning of the century had given state education for Indonesian children a considerable stimulus. But opportunities for girls were still very limited. It was therefore very important that Kartini-schools, Dutch schools for girls from the indigenous aristocracy, were founded from 1913 onwards. This happened on the initiative of Mr. C.Th. van Deventer and his wife. The Kartini school in Buitenzorg was opened in 1914 and Soewarsih entered it in 1918, two years after her elder sister

Soewarni. Their schooling was paid for by their grandparents for whom this became an increasing burden in the course of the ensuing years. At first the sisters lived in the boarding house of the school, but when later this became too costly, they stayed at home with their parents.

In her memoirs Soewarsih speaks with gratitude of the Dutch lady whose task it was "to teach us to speak proper Dutch, to acquire Dutch table manners and to give up the habit of sleeping at irregular hours; she also watched over our moral development." Both sisters were gifted pupils and also attended the M.U.L.O. school (advanced elementary education) in Buitenzorg. Some figures will explain what this meant for an indigenous girl in those days. In 1918 Soewarsih was one of about fifty girls who were admitted to the first form of the Kartini school. Thirteen of them completed all seven forms, but only four were allowed to attend advanced education. Thus Soewarsih and her sister were in an exceptional position. They themselves became sharply aware of this, when for the first time they came in contact with European and Eurasian fellow students. The experience of being considered 'inferior' by their classmates and the impossibility of breaking through the dividing lines between themselves and the others, strengthened their feeling of being 'different'. Of that period Soewarsih was to write: "Although we were still very young at that time, we realized that life would not be easy for us and that intelligence and learning would be the only weapons with which we could overcome the numerous difficulties."

In their uncertain search for their own identity, nationalist feelings were playing an increasingly important role. Both of them joined 'Jong Java', a nationalist youth movement. Even at the age of sixteen Soewarni --or rather Nining, as she was always called-- was one of the prominent figures in this movement. She was, for instance, the moving spirit behind providing education for illiterate women

from the kampongs. Even as a child she was always the centre of attention. She found it easy to get along with people, was quick-witted in discussion and full of ideas which she was able to communicate persuasively. She was a born leader. Mainly from 1930 onwards, when she had become Mrs. Pringgodigdo, she played a very important role in the feminist movement in Indonesia.

It was inevitable that the more introvert Soewarsih, who as a younger sister was always taken under Nining's wing, should for a long time remain in the shadow of her admired sister. The feelings of uncertainty with which Soewarsih struggled not only in her youth but also later, may be partly explained through this relationship with her older sister, which was also the reason why developing her strong personality was such a difficult process. In the middle of the thirties it became clear how unyielding Soewarsih could be even towards her sister, when she opposed Nining's constant suggestions and advice and, together with her husband, continued along the difficult path which she had chosen much earlier.

After the M.U.L.O.-school Soewarsih attended the European teacher training college in Soerabaja from 1928 to 1931. She received free education and her room and board were paid for by the Kartini fund. She was one of only two Indonesians selected for a class of thirty students. In her memoirs she talks about it: "At the beginning my Dutch classmates were slightly contemptuous of the two little Javanese who had been chosen to study with them. Their attitude was understandable and I could forgive them, because in their eyes at that time Indonesians were considered inferior. Keeping a school 'white' gave style and standing to such a school. Because of our presence its status had been seriously damaged." However, she also writes that they gained the respect of their fellow students on account of their excellent records. Her Dutch teacher gave her high marks for her essays: "this was a

token of great courage, given the situation in those days; if he had given lower marks, nobody would have protested, because the difference between the Dutch and Indonesians was so great and seemed so unbridgeable."

The same teacher told his students about Multatuli and read from his works. The great importance of Multatuli's influence on young Indonesians showed itself also in Soewarsih's case: "When my teacher had read something from *Max Havelaar*, I no longer felt lonely at home. My life had become meaningful again, and I realized which direction I had to give to my future. I heard the girls next door laughing and enjoying themselves. And I said to myself: 'My life differs from theirs. One can say that we have no 'youth', but 'youth' is not granted to us, young Indonesians. For, as soon as we have left school, a difficult task lies ahead of us: to be leaders of our people.' It seemed arrogant to put it this way, but in later years it appeared that my generation had to contribute a lot to the nationalist movement, albeit only as small contributors, not as the leading figures we had earlier imagined."

It was in those Soerabaja years that Soewarsih came in contact with nationalist education. It happened in Bandoeng where she often stayed with her sister Nining during school holidays. Together with some of her friends Nining had opened a small school, a so-called 'wild' school --not subsidized by the government-- where Indonesian children were brought up in a nationalist spirit. These nationalist schools had existed from the beginning of the twenties, but since then their number had considerably increased. The development of this unofficial education had been reinforced by the fact that the government had failed to meet the rapidly growing demand for western schooling among the Indonesian people. This schooling gave access to the European labour market in the Indies. Dutch primary schools for native children,

linked with secondary education, were far too few; from 1932 onwards, mainly because of far-reaching cutbacks, no more new schools were founded. In these circumstances the Indonesian nationalist leaders decided to deal themselves with the enormous problem of illiteracy among their people --about 95% in the nineteen thirties-- by founding their own schools.

As the native teachers in these schools had themselves received a Dutch education, it was a matter of course that the materials and methods they used were western orientated. Moreover, the nationalists understood very well that the schooling they gave had to meet the requirements of modern society and that such a western direction was in the interest also of their own future state. At the same time, however, they had to think about the way in which the Indonesian identity could be retained in their schools and the nationalist consciousness could be developed. In this connection the founding, in 1922, of the *Taman-Siswo* (Kindergarten) movement by the Javanese aristocrat Ki Hadjar Dewantoro was an important event. This organization, as soon became apparent, was a great success; in 1940 there were about 250 *Taman-Siswo* schools. They were based on a program which emphasized national cultural values, but at the same time remained open to enriching elements from other, especially western, cultures. In order not to alienate the children from their own environment and way of life and also to keep the costs as low as possible, *Taman-Siswo* schools used simple classrooms and materials. Ki Hadjar Dewantoro's ideas determined not only the character of his own movement, but also exercised considerable influence on the 'wild' schools in general.

As we have seen, Soewarsih had become acquainted with the nationalist education while she was a student. She had experienced how poor but idealistic teachers, together with the equally poor parents of their pupils, tried to organize

ways of raising the money needed for classrooms and teaching materials. Now, she herself was taking an active part in the feminist movement, giving instruction in child care and other practical subjects to women in Soerabaja. In her memoirs she writes about the fate of women: "Married at fifteen, three or more children, hard work, drudgery in fact; not yet thirty when the first bloom is over, repudiated by their husbands, without money to take care of the children. Such was the fate of these ordinary Indonesian women." The education of children and the feminist movement occupied a significant place in Indonesian nationalism during the twenties and thirties. Gradually the conviction developed that women could also make an important contribution in the struggle for independence. But in a society in which women traditionally had an inferior position and polygamy was widespread, Soewarsih saw herself confronted with the tremendous task of making men recognize her as an equal. One of her aims in life was to become the equal partner in the struggle for a shared ideal.

After finishing her studies at the teacher's training college --she was one of the very first Indonesian teachers with a European certificate-- Soewarsih taught at a nationalist school in Batavia. Soon afterwards she married Soegondo Djojopoespito who was working at the same 'wild' school. It was an 'open' marriage, in other words a marriage held together by the partners' free choice, which until recently had been absolutely impossible in Javanese society.

Soegondo Djojopoespito was born in Toeban (East-Java) in 1905. He went to the H.I.S. (Dutch primary education for natives) in his place of birth, and to the M.U.L.O. in Soerabaja. Subsequently he attended the A.M.S. (secondary education) in Djogjakarta. From 1925 he was a student at the School of Law in Batavia and got his first degree in 1928. Then he broke off his studies in order to work for the

nationalist cause. In 1927 he was appointed chairman of the Perhimpoeaan Peladjar-Peladjar Indonesia (Federation of Indonesian Students) and one year later he chaired the second Indonesian Youth Congress which became famous in Indonesian history on account of its Soempah Pemoeda (Oath of the Youth), in which the unity of Indonesia was stated for the first time. Thus, like Soewarsih, Soegondo was a nationalist from the very beginning and, like his young wife, considered the provision of schooling for the children of the common people his main task.

When Soewarsih started her work in the service of the nationalist movement in 1931, times had become more difficult. From the end of the twenties --after the communist rebellion in Bantam of 1926 and the founding of the 'Vaderlandsche Club' (an association of colonial diehards) as a reaction to this-- the differences of opinion between the Dutch government and Indonesian nationalists were considerably sharpened. Increasing police action led to the arrest of the main political leaders and their deportation to the notorious Boven-Digoel and other camps. Of course, in this atmosphere the pressure on nationalist education also increased considerably. Dutch control of nationalist teachers had existed for years, on the basis of the 'Wilde Scholen Ordonnantie' of 1923, but now repression was increasingly felt. The fear of arrest or at least of a teaching ban, the daily improvisations in order not to succumb economically or psychologically and the tensions in their own circle taxed the idealism and endurance of these people. It often meant a constant struggle and for Soewarsih and Soegondo it also led to a nomadic existence in Java.

The period in Soewarsih's and Soegondo's life which is described in *Buiten het gareel*, covers about four years, from 1933 to 1937. The year before, as the novel tells us, Soewarsih, who had gone from Batavia to a teaching post in

Poerwakarta (West-Java), had again joined her husband who had just become headmaster of the *Taman-Siswo* school in Bandoeng; in 1937 she was again in Bandoeng, but now unemployed, after disappointing experiences at a nationalist school in Semarang --in the novel this is Hapsoro's school-- and a stay with her family in Djogjakarta. With the information we have about Soewarsih's life, it is not difficult to show how much the author used her own experiences, usually preserving their chronological order, as the starting point for her book. This affects not only episodes and events, but also certain individuals. One could even call *Buiten het gareel* a roman à clef. Soelastri and Soedarmo stand for Soewarsih and Soegondo, and Marti and Kartonegoro are modelled on Soewarsih's sister Nining and her husband Abdoel Karim Pringgodigdo. In Soetrisno, who with Soedarmo opens a little school in Buitenzorg, we recognize Soejitno Mangoenkoesoemo, a brother of the prominent nationalist Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo. Also Soelarso, an ex-prisoner in Boven-Digoel and a colleague of Soelastri and Soedarmo, must be drawn from real life. Soewarsih's parents are also present in the book. One character even figures under his own name, though only vaguely depicted. It is the nationalist leader Soekarno.

Soewarsih Djojopoespito wrote her book in Dutch. This is remarkable in itself and had to do with earlier events which, in part, are described in the novel. After her disappointment in Semarang, Soewarsih had found shelter with her family in Djogjakarta. Soegondo was somewhere else looking for work and their marriage went through a crisis. To take her mind off things and considering that she could perhaps be useful in some other way, she wrote a short novel in her native Sundanese about the problem of the relationship between man and woman in marriage. The novel describes the unhappy married life of a young woman

whose husband is unfaithful to her. She sent the manuscript to the publishing house Balai Poestaka, the official 'Kantoor voor Volkslectuur'. However, it was refused because, according to Balai Poestaka, it was not didactic and its style was too complicated. In short, the novel was not traditional enough and therefore not suitable for the reading public. Many years later, in 1959, the novel was published under the title *Marjanah* by the same publisher.

The refusal of her manuscript deeply disappointed Soewarsih. Some time later, in 1938, she and her husband, who had found employment again in Bandoeng, met Edgar du Perron who had recently come back to his country of origin. This contact had come about through *Kritiek en Opbouw*, a progressive, anti-colonial magazine which had been founded in Bandoeng by the social-democrat D.M.G. Koch in 1938. In the course of that year Du Perron had joined the editorial board, on which Indonesian nationalists were also represented. This was unique, given the colonial situation of those days. Soewarsih, who had contributed some articles to the magazine, and her husband were in touch with this group.

The short period during which Soewarsih and Soegondo were in contact with Du Perron, who returned to the Netherlands in 1939, was a high point in their lives which turned out to be of great importance for their future. With his sharp insight into human relationships, du Perron immediately noticed their social and especially their mental isolation. In an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust and through completely frank discussions of their problems, they regained their self-esteem.

Du Perron heard of the rejection of Soewarsih's manuscript and persuaded her to take up writing again and to describe her own experiences during the last few years. He suggested she should write in Dutch, the language which she could handle better than her native Sundanese. And thus she

began writing *Buiten het gareel*. Du Perron coached her and gave her his essay *Uren met Dirk Coster* as an example of a plain, honest and personal style. As he himself had just finished his *Het land van herkomst*, he could talk to her about the problems of the autobiographer. This concern for 'writing' we can find in Soewarsih's book; it even decided the final form of the novel. I am referring here to the first and part of the last chapter in which, as it were, the real story is embedded and where Soelastri does not figure as the main character, but as the woman who is confronted with the complications and the possibilities of being a writer. It is very likely that Du Perron exerted a decisive influence on this structure, which was something new in modern Indonesian literary prose.

Du Perron took the manuscript with him to the Netherlands, looked for a publisher and wrote an introduction. In 1940 it was published by De Haan in Utrecht, but on account of the war it did not reach the Indonesian reading public. During the turbulent time following the declaration of the Indonesian Republic in 1945, the reprint of 1946 fared no better.³

The importance of Du Perron's influence on *Buiten het gareel* becomes clear if we look at the novel against the background of pre-war Indonesian literature. In addition to its innovative form, compared to the Indonesian literary norms of the time, there are also new elements in its content. Overwritten descriptions and moralizing passages were significant ingredients in Indonesian literature during the thirties. Soewarsih's novel, however, is not 'overwritten', and the book offers no didactic message. It is modern also in the way Soewarsih depicts her alter ego Soelastri and analyses her feelings with self-critical irony, especially when 'sentimentality', which is always in the background, threatens to carry her away. Her honesty at these moments is one of the most striking characteristics of the book.

As we read the novel, we can hear Soewarsih's voice and detect her compelling need to put order into that jumble of experiences and emotions of the last years, to clear her mind in order to prepare for the future. She knew that the future, too, would be difficult. Du Perron's words of farewell, "life has nothing to do with career; self-esteem is most valuable," were to serve Soewarsih as guide and comfort in her future life.

Buiten het gareel is a nationalist novel. The main characters are nationalists who try to realize their ideals in the classroom. In the book attention is concentrated on the characters themselves, on their tensions and conflicts. The struggle of Indonesian women for emancipation is also emphasized: the fight of women who want to have the same rights and responsibilities as men. It was the fight of Soewarsih Djojopoespito herself and we meet her in Soelastri, to whom it is of great importance to be the equal of her husband Soedarmo in marriage and in her career.

Soewarsih and Soegondo were working in Batavia when the Netherlands were occupied by Germany in 1940. As intellectuals who believed in democracy, they were aware that cooperation with the Dutch was necessary if there was to be a chance to stop authoritarian imperialism from Japan. In a startling article in *Kritiek en Opbouw* of August 1941, Soewarsih made an urgent appeal to the government to release the imprisoned nationalist leaders and to wage a joint fight against "the menacing fascist power" for the sake of "the democratic principle". Her plea proved to be in vain. Even earlier her wish for cooperation with the Dutch had led her to take another, no less remarkable step: she had accepted a job at a government school in Batavia, a decision which stemmed from her profound democratic convictions.

With the Japanese invasion in March 1942 Dutch colonial rule came to an end. It was under the new masters that Indonesia

prepared for its future existence in freedom. In 1942 Soewarsih and her husband moved to Djogjakarta where they remained for the rest of their lives. Between 1945 and 1950 they were members of a national council which advised the Indonesian government. For a short time Soegondo was also a minister in the government. In 1951 they retired from public life. As democratic socialists --they belonged to Soetan Sjahrir's circle-- they felt increasingly alienated from the political and social-economic policy which Indonesia pursued. In a letter of 1973, Soewarsih, writing on poverty and social injustice, noticed: "We have paid and are still paying a high price for our freedom." They were condemned to a new isolation, "thrown away like a rag" as Soewarsih used to say bitterly. And continually she had to worry about the money they and their three children needed to live and, later, about insulin for her diabetes. Now and then she became seriously ill. Moreover, she suffered from feelings of uncertainty and doubt about the usefulness of her struggles and her life afterwards. She yearned for some recognition and appreciation, which she did not receive even as a writer of Indonesian short stories. When, at the beginning of 1976, she received a literary award, she wrote with some pride in a letter: "at least some appreciation and some money." She found relaxation in handicrafts; she made woollen toy animals for her grandchildren and little table mats and beautiful crochet stoles. She enjoyed doing this and, moreover, it provided some extra income: "I do not want to burden anybody, certainly not my children who have their own difficulties. Then I can die with the feeling that I bothered no one, and that I did my best during my whole life and that I always remained good-humoured, however difficult things were", she wrote in a letter. In this she did succeed, cheerfully and with courage. She could tell gripping stories and sometimes speak sharply about the many disappointments in her life, but all

the time with humour and irony, for she could laugh at herself.

It was not surprising that Soewarsih - spontaneous as she was and open and direct in the way she approached people- had trouble settling in Djogjakarta. The Javanese atmosphere oppressed her, as it oppressed Soelastri in *Buiten het gareel*: "In fact Soelastri disliked her environment; with her healthy nature she felt rebellious against this extremely refined culture and was unpleasantly struck by the dullness in the movements of the people. She realized that her feelings of depression were caused by the difference between Javanese and Sundanese, based on ancient antipathies." Moreover, Soewarsih found Central Java gloomy. She constantly felt homesick for the bright skies, the fresh green and the mountains of the Preanger, her native soil, and for the people there with whom she felt at home. Only rarely could she go there. What she especially remembered of her visit to Holland in 1953 at the invitation of Sticusa, a cultural organization, were the fresh greenery, the smell and the colours of spring which reminded her of the early mornings in Tjibatok.

In June 1970 I met Soewarsih for the first time. On that evening and on the following evenings we talked about *Buiten het gareel* and its background. She felt glad that there were still young people who read her book, that she had not been entirely forgotten. Some years later, when she read the passages which Rob Nieuwenhuys had written about her work in his *Oost-Indische Spiegel*⁴ and received the anthology *Het laat je niet los* in which a fragment from *Buiten het gareel* had been included⁵, she wrote in April 1974: "I did not know that what I wrote at that time would remain valuable and would attract attention today." A few months later Andries Teeuw, professor of Malay and Indonesian language and literature in Leiden and I made a proposal to translate her novel into Indonesian with financial help from the

Dutch government. Soewarsih translated the book herself and it was published in 1975, thirty-five years after the first printing. She felt, as she wrote in a letter, "the happiness of an old woman who sees herself again as a young woman of forty years ago, and now feels that she had not lived in vain I consider my book as a kind of last will and testament for our young people, a simple thing which I can offer them. Life without ideals is barren and dry."

With the money she got for her translation, she had her house redecorated and painted in bright colours: "It is more cheerful this way than the dark green which depresses and reminds me of the grave (...). Now I am not thinking of illness or other unpleasant things. I feel something like a new life, a kind of early spring, which will enable me to write something new."

Soewarsih translated her book under the title *Manusia bebas* (Man set free)⁶. This "means a human being," she writes, "free from prejudice, free from fear, from conventions and traditions. In my efforts to be mentally free, I often experienced failures and met hostility among my own people. I am aware that a human being must first be liberated before thinking of building a better future for the nation."

During the first months of 1977, my wife and I often visited her and her husband. Her unfailingly bright and dynamic mind made one forget her physical decline. She was eagerly looking forward to a stay in her native region, but this plan came to nothing: the doctor diagnosed lung cancer in her husband and she had to take care of him. A few months later, on August 24th, 1977, she suddenly died of a cerebral haemorrhage. Soegondo followed her eight months later, on April 23rd, 1978.

NOTES

¹Earlier I wrote on this subject in 'Soewarsih Djojopoespito', a so-called 'Levensbericht', in

Jaarboek van de maatschappij der Nederlandse letterkunde te Leiden (1978-1979), p. 39-48. A list of Soewarsih Djojopoespito's main writings was added to this article. In *Indische Letteren*, vol. 1, no. 4 (December 1986) one can find three contributions dealing with Soewarsih Djojopoespito and her work: Robert-Henk Zuidinga, 'Soewarsih Djojopoespito, E. du Perron en de roman *Buiten het gareel*,' A. Teeuw, 'Een buitenbeentje in de literatuurgeschiedenis' and Gerard Termorshuizen, 'Een leven in isolement'.

As regards the proper names, I have preserved the old spelling of before 1972 which was used by Soewarsih Djojopoespito.

²The memoirs concerned are in my possession.

³After 1946 the novel was reprinted twice: in 1947 the third printing came out, and in 1986 the fourth appeared (publ. by Nijgh & Van Ditmar, Amsterdam). For the last reprint I wrote an 'afterword'.

⁴Rob Nieuwenhuys, *Oost-Indische Spiegel; Wat Nederlandse schrijvers en dichters over Indonesië hebben geschreven, vanaf de eerste jaren der compagnie tot op heden* (Amsterdam, 1978), p. 401-404.

⁵*Het laat je niet los. Een keuze uit de Indisch-Nederlandse letterkunde van 1935 tot heden*, ed. and introd. Rob Nieuwenhuys, p. 138-142.

⁶Suwersih Djojopoespito, *Manusia bebas* (Jakarta, 1975).