

The Asian and Eurasian woman in the Dutch East Indies, in Dutch and Malay literature

Introduction

At some point in my life I chose to study Indonesian literature because I thought it would give me the best opportunity to learn about the way Indonesians think, behave, interact and express themselves. Throughout my student years, when the second feminist wave affected society and academia, I developed a special interest in gender issues. I strove to understand the role and position of women and to acquire a gender ideology, and I found some answers in novels and short stories. Feminist theory has helped me to formulate and conceptualize my ideas. To quote from *The Feminist Reader* by Belsey and Moore:

The feminist reader is enlisted in the process of changing the gender relations which prevail in our society, and she regards the practice of reading as one of the sites in the struggle for change. (1981: 1).

For the feminist literary critic, all interpretation is political. S/he examines how women are represented and how the text deals with gender relations and sexual difference. From a feminist perspective, literature cannot be isolated from the culture of which it forms a part:

A literary text invites its readers to understand what it means to be a woman or a man, and so encourages them to reaffirm or to challenge existing cultural norms. (*ibid*).

What a reader finds, however, depends on the questions she/he asks the text.

In this paper I will look at texts from the colonial period which deal with the Dutch East Indies around the turn of the century. Although Malay/Indonesian literature is what I have chosen to study professionally, Dutch literature has always been a part

of my life. In the compartmentalization of Dutch academic tradition, Malay texts have been considered part of a literary tradition distinct from that of Dutch texts. Therefore, Malay and Dutch literature have been studied separately in different departments, by different people. However, it is a fruitful exercise to connect the two, to juxtapose and compare them and to read them intertextually, seeking for answers to questions which are typically post-colonial.

Post-modernism and deconstruction have questioned and subverted the notion of one central and correct reading of a text. Instead, texts are considered to be multi-interpretable, and meanings are cultural and learned, plural, unfixed and constantly changing. Deconstruction offers readers, especially female/feminist readers, the freedom to look for new interpretations. The more political approach towards criticism has resulted in "an anthropologization of reading" (see Culler 1988: viii, xiii), that is the study of literature within its cultural context. From this angle, issues of gender are integrated with those of class and race. A crucial question in post-modernism is whether the subaltern can speak. The subaltern I am looking for in this paper is, firstly, the Asian woman, and, secondly, the Eurasian woman living in the colonial society of the Dutch Indies. To find her is to interpret silences and to that what has mainly been annihilated significant.

One of the themes of this paper is "Occidental Male meets Oriental Female", and it is hardly surprising that this topic interests me, since I myself am the product of such an east-west meeting. My paternal grandparents were Dutch, living in the Indies (on Java) where my father was born. He went to Holland for his education and then returned to Java. My maternal grandparents were Javanese, living in West Java (Sunda) where my mother was born, grew up and went through the Dutch language school system. My parents met and married on Java and, as a result, produced me - the *Indo* (Eurasian, 50% Asian, 50% European) prototype. In spite of my

place of birth (Surabaya, Indonesia) and my genetic constitution, I grew up thinking about myself as an ordinary Dutch girl.

Historical background

The first European colonists who came to the Indonesian archipelago - the Portuguese, Spaniards, Netherlanders - were all male. Around 1600 AD, the Netherlands East Indies Company started to establish several trading settlements on the coasts of Java, Sumatra and the Moluccas, and this was the beginning of three hundred and fifty years of Dutch presence on the islands of Southeast Asia. It soon became clear that, if these men were to be 'stayers' (*blijvers*) instead of 'ramblers' (*trekkers*), they should not be provided with white (European) brides, who would definitely want to return to their homeland once children were born and in need of (a European) education. Therefore, a young Dutch man who came to the Netherlands Indies was prohibited from marrying a European wife and encouraged to develop an association with a local woman instead. These women were either slaves (until 1860 when slavery was abolished) or free women who were made housekeepers/concubines. Soon after the European men moved into the islands, the first Eurasians (*Indo's*) were born. In the 17th century, Christian sexual moral constraints as found in The Netherlands did not apply to the Indies, and the European-Asian unions were used as the East Indies Company's policy to prevent Dutch men from repatriation.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, major changes took place. From an economic, political and social viewpoint, the real colonization period started only then. Immigration patterns shifted, and more white women came to live in the Indies. The colonial society became Europeanized thanks to improved communication and transportation systems. The members of the *totok* (white, Dutch-speaking) community could more easily make contact with each other, and on their furloughs the Dutch regularly traveled back to Holland. At this point, the white immigrants tended to become more of the 'ramblers' (*trekkers*) than of the 'stayers' (*blijvers*) type. As a result of the changes, racial segregation became more evident, developing a hand-in-glove relationship with local class distinctions. But the Eurasians, who by then were numerous, had developed their own life style and cultural patterns; as a group and a social

force, they could not be ignored. Key elements for the continuation of this group were white men, indigenous concubines and Eurasian wives (see Taylor 1983: 132). However, with an increasing Dutch community, Eurasians increasingly became second-class citizens. White people ousted Eurasians from top positions. The white women who came to the Indies were confronted with the sexual practices of their white fellow-countrymen. They learned and had to accept that white men, their husbands or possible future spouses, had lived or were living with local women as their concubines and had extramarital (Eurasian) children. By the time mixed marriages were legitimized (1898), racial and social segregation had become so extreme that such marriages were strongly frowned upon.

Out of this colonial society around the turn of the century emerged literary texts in Dutch and Malay which deal with the existing social and racial interrelations and internal differences of this period. The texts reflect structures of power according to social class, race and gender. The literary works in Malay which I discuss here have been ignored by the scholarly world for a long time. Distinct from the so-called classical Malay texts, these texts indicate a transitional stage of writing in Malay, a period when the literary court tradition shifted towards a modern Indonesian literature. A major contribution in this field was made by Salmon when she published her bibliography *Literature in Malay by the Chinese of Indonesia* (1981). However, to fully understand this period of writing, much more research has to be done. My remarks here thus have a preliminary character.

The white man's view

It is almost inevitable that the dominant perception we have of the period around 1900 is the white man's view. Dutch male novelists such as Multatuli, P.A. Daum and L. Couperus helped to create an image of the Indies' society in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Even today, their novels are widely read and are popular due to their realistic depiction of social life in the Indies, which is generally considered very accurate.

A topic specifically found in Dutch-Indies prose writing, which distinguishes these writings from novels in Holland, is that of the 'hidden force' (title of Couperus' famous novel; *De Stille Kracht*), which

denotes mysteriousness, obscurity and supernatural powers beyond the control of human beings. The very existence of the hidden force accentuates the racial differentiation in Dutch-Indies society. The indigenous Indonesian people are relatively at ease with spirits and supernatural forces. They are able to cope with them or even to manipulate them to a certain extent. Eurasians who have access to the local people (relatives, servants), can also handle invisible powers. It is the *totoks* (white Europeans) who do not know how to grapple with this phenomenon, which is so alien to them, and they therefore unwittingly become victims.

Two novels by Daum deal with the topic of the 'hidden force': *Goena-goena* (Indonesian/Malay for Black Magic, 1889) and *Nummer Elf* (Dutch - Number Eleven, 1893). I give in short the summaries. In *Goena-goena* a young Eurasian woman, Betsy, comes into the lives of Bronkhorst and his wife, Marie, both *totoks*. Betsy is impressed by Bronkhorst's affluence and decides she wants him at all costs. She poisons her husband and then starts intriguing, using *goena-goena* potions which her old indigenous servant helps her to get. Bronkhorst is captivated by Betsy's manipulations and agrees to divorce Marie. Because of Marie's attitude of common sense, none of this is realized. Betsy is exposed as an evil woman and is forced to leave. Bronkhorst is cured and saved.

Nummer Elf relates the story of Lena Bruce, a Caucasian, but born and bred in the Indies. A friend of her father's, George Vermey, dismisses his Eurasian *nyai* (concubine), Yps, to propose to Lena. To his disgrace, she turns him down. He regains Yps as his concubine and moves to Batavia. A few years later George sends Yps to the *kampung* (backstreets) and proposes to Lena for a second time. This time she accepts his proposal. Yps feels very resentful. After the first baby is born, Lena takes a while to recover. When George cannot resist the temptation to visit Yps to satisfy his sexual needs, this is for Yps proof that George is not happy with his marriage. With the assistance of her indigenous mother she succeeds in poisoning Lena, administering a pill 'number eleven pill'. George does not try to sue her because a 'number eleven pill' is very hard to prove and any publicity will damage his reputation.

The Dutch novels about the colonial society firmly

present a white, masculine bias in which the relation between the oriental (native or Eurasian) female and the occidental male is always sexualized. Indigenous men are sexless and play a role of no importance. Oriental women occur in the stories as *nyais*, concubines of Dutch masters/employers, or wives. The image presented is that the oriental woman tries to enhance her reputation through her relationship with a man. She uses her female sexuality as a commodity to purchase status quo, economic security and affluence. Her sense of self is concentrated on her physical attraction and seductive power. She shows very little self-esteem.

For an oriental woman, a liaison with a occidental man implies riches and prestige. In these texts she is not only the gendered Other, but also the unknown and culturally mysterious Other. Her conduct and motives are incomprehensible and unpredictable. The occidental male does not make any efforts to understand the inner life or psyche of the indigenous woman in his life. Racial and cultural differences evidently reinforce the gender differences. Power accumulates in the occidental male, whereas the oriental female becomes an asset, a sexual object who hardly needs human treatment. She is easily replaceable, either by another *nyai* or by a white woman who becomes the occidental man's official wife. The oriental woman nurtures and takes care of the occidental man without demanding much for herself personally. Racial, cultural and gender differentiation make oriental women even more into that axiom of Virginia Woolf's "looking-glasses possessing that magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (Woolf 1977: 35).

In the two novels, Betsy and Yps, both Eurasian, are destructive and manipulative. The name 'Yps' is remarkably uncommon. Back to front it reads 'spy' and indicates how suspicious she is as a character, being part of two worlds but affixed to only one. Assisted by native women, Betsy and Yps apply *goena-goena* and poison those who are in their way. *Goena-goena* reinforces their female seductiveness. What do women readers make of these female characters? Where does a feminine reading of such texts lead to? What women find in the texts is that they are evil and destructive. These texts assume "that 'the reader' is male. [...] Women are led to identify with male characters against their own

interests as women. They are alienated from an experience appropriate to their condition as women." (Culler 1983:44, 51).

More research is needed to ascertain who in the Dutch speaking community formed the readership at the end of the 19th century. There must have been male and female readers who may have lived in the Netherlands or in the Dutch Indies, and they could have been either Dutch, Eurasians or Indonesians with a Dutch education. No one has ever raised her voice against the depiction of devilish Eurasian and indigenous women, or questioned the portrayal of women as destructive creatures. It must be because, as female readers, we have internalized and accepted the male perspective and norms. Nor has anyone interpreted those images as celebrations of the dark side in women, as the raging she-devils and witches, a side which is oppressed by the ideological construct of femininity.

In a recent study, a Dutch male critic pointed out that in *Goena-goena* the author is a defender of the rights of women in marriage and that he takes sides with Bronkhorst's wife. After all it is thanks to Marie that the *goena-goena* does not have the desired effect (Termorshuizen 1988: 414). His reading implies that Marie is the heroine of the story. Are female readers then to identify with her - the white woman, the rational, down-to-earth, faithful but also boring housewife? The hidden mechanism at work here is that of one woman as opposed to another, white against Eurasian/native. That way the identification of race overshadows the identification of gender. It leaves the oriental female readers in a position of double displacement, being non-female and non-white.

Another Dutch novel, entitled *Njai Blanda* (The Dutch Concubine), was published around 1917 under the pseudonym Melantjong. So far I have found no biographical information on the author, and I cannot even ascertain whether Melantjong is a man or a woman. Because of the use of language and the style of narration I am inclined to think the author is female. The two main characters in the novel are adherents of free love as advocated by the suffragette movement. The woman, Tine, has a PhD and wants to keep her independence; the man, Veer, does not believe in marriage as an institution. They live as common-law husband and wife, but when they move to the Indies they pretend to be brother and sister to

keep up appearances in front of the narrow-minded Indies' society. A Eurasian woman, passionately in love with Veer, wants to find out the reality of their relationship at all costs. With the help of her native servant she hides in their bedroom and discovers the truth. In a most contemptuous letter she accuses Tine of being 'a *njai Blanda*, a Dutch concubine'. As a result Tine falls into a stupor. The jealous Eurasian woman has succeeded in her attempt to destroy this intruder in the colonial society - a white woman with her liberated ideas.

Using the concept of free love and the suffragette movement, the novel challenges the hypocrisy of the colonial society and the sexual double standards which allow white men to live with Eurasian or Indonesian concubines but condemns a common-law marriage between two Europeans. The book is clearly in favour of the goals of the suffragettes, which at first sight seems to endorse progressiveness. However, the narrative reveals a basic racist attitude. The Indies' society is portrayed with much contempt for its conservatism and intolerance. Veer is strongly opposed to concubinage. According to him, a Dutch man who lives with an Indonesian *nyai* degrades himself, not because of the extra-marital relationship but because the woman is a native. He considers Eurasians - especially Eurasian women - stupid, blinkered, vain and prudish.

Interestingly, this Dutch novel has been translated into Malay but both the translator and the year of publication (probably early 1920s) are unknown. There must have been a receptive audience in the Malay-speaking world, otherwise it would not have been translated. Whether in Dutch or in Malay, this novel can only be read as a male reader would read it. The female characters are either malicious or victimized. Although there is a clear sense of white superiority, this does not help to establish a white feminine reading.

Two Malay Texts

The Malay stories are often realistic in tone and claim historicity. The authors are mainly Eurasian and Chinese and almost all men. Very little is known about the readership in the Malay-speaking world - its social class, ethnicity, geographical location. We do know, however, that these books were popular among the Chinese-Malay and circulated in the lending

libraries. The characters in the stories derive from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including Europeans, Eurasians, Indonesians and Chinese. (Note that one hardly ever finds Chinese characters in the Dutch novels.)

When I first started working on these Malay texts, I knew that many works were entitled '*Njai*...', and therefore I expected to find *nyais*, i.e. concubines, as main characters in the stories. That, however, turned out to be an illusion. The word *nyai* in these texts refer to the Sundanese *nyai* meaning "(young) woman" and does not, as in the Dutch novels, necessarily imply concubinage, or an alliance between man and woman without marriage.

Two stories which deal with *nyais* as concubines of European men are *Tjerita Nji Paina* by H. Kommer (1900) and *Njai Dasima* by G. Francis (1896). Both authors are Eurasian. *Nyi Paina* is the attractive daughter of Niti Atmodjo, who works at a Dutch sugar plant. Accused of stealing money, Niti is forced to hand over *Nyi Paina* to his Dutch boss as his concubine. She complies with a heavy heart. The morning she is to leave for her new home, she secretly visits a village where the people are infected by smallpox. Ten days after she has lived with her Dutch master, he is infected with the disease and four days later he dies. *Nyi Paina* herself is also infected, but recovers. Her face is pockmarked for the rest of her life. In spite of that, she marries a wealthy Javanese and lives happily ever after.

Nji Paina represents the Indonesian perspective, and the Dutch in this story are The Other, the intruders. They are all male and portrayed as ugly, rude and heavy drinkers. Seen through the eyes of an Asian woman, the patriarchal colonial setting stands for power-relations where gender and race inequalities are insurmountable. The colonized woman, the subaltern who cannot speak, is seemingly victimized and powerless. She has a method of resistance, though, which is to inflict damage on herself, thus risking her own life. In the end, *Nyi Paina* can claim victory. She succeeds in holding out in the patriarchal colonial system.

Nyai Dasima is one of the most popular Malay stories and has been used in many performances in the streets, on stage and on the screen. In contrast to *Nji Paina*, the *Nyai Dasima* story idealizes the

relationship between an indigenous woman and a European man. *Nyai Dasima* is lured away from her European master by the cunning behaviour of Samium, an Indonesian. He, his wife and mother are after her material wealth. They argue that she does not live according to the laws of Islam and convince her that living with her European master is sinful. However, when *Nyai Dasima* gets married to Samium in conformity with the Muslim law, she finds herself in a polygamous marriage and has many problems with her co-wife and mother-in-law. When *Dasima* threatens to return to her former master and appeal to European law, Samium has her murdered. He and his accomplices are arrested.

Although many versions of the story exist in prose and poetry, this version by Francis is the oldest narrative and it comes out with a strong anti-Muslim message (see Hellwig 1993: 15). Islam is the key element in the story. Religion instead of race determines a person's identity. *Nyai Dasima* is the victim of her fellow-Indonesians, both men and women (Samium, his wife and mother). She too is given *goena-goena* in order to be trapped. In spite of the changes in later versions, it is surprising that this story became so popular among Indonesians, since it depicts them as a bad party whereas the white man is ultimately righteous.

Two other texts written by Chinese authors which I will only briefly mention here are *Njai Warsih* (n.d.) by Thio Tjin Boen (1885-1940) and *Controleur Malheure* (1912) by Th. H. Phoa. The stories do not center on the colonial division of power; they reveal a gender ideology through two aspects of the oedipal relationship (father-daughter versus mother-son). While in the first story *Warsih's* adopted father has been the primary caregiver to his daughter ever since she was five, they eventually get married. No taboo exists against the consummation of this father-daughter love. Their relationship is not incestuous in the narrow sense of the word, since he is not her biological father. However, given the circumstances, their marriage is questionable and dubious.

In the second story, *Pecha Malheure* grows up in Holland from the age of five onwards, separated from his Javanese mother Sarinten, his father's former *nyai*. Sixteen years later he is back in the Indies as a civil servant. At a party, in a state of drunkenness, he is attracted to the performing *ronggeng* (dancer) and

orders her to see him in his house. When he meets her the next day, he discovers that she is his mother, and, on his knees in front of her, he shoots himself. Sarinten kills herself with poison. The sheer fact that Pecha has lusted after his mother is reason for both to commit suicide.

The two stories convey a moral message and ideological concepts concerning gender and sexuality. Marriage between an older male and younger female are generally accepted, and, therefore, Warsih's marriage with her father is presented as acceptable. Any hint of sexualization of the mother-son bond, however, is to be penalized. An incestuous mother-son relationship is the most serious sin possible.

The texts I discussed in this paper were written by men. Novels written by Dutch women on the Indies exist but are not as widely known as those written by men. Chinese women wrote in Malay but their works are even more scarce, locked away in museums and hardly accessible. "Feminist criticism confronts the problem of women as consumers of male-produced literature [...] it has to be alert to the critical ramifications of sexual oppression" (Culler 1983: 48, 56). With the outstanding exception of Raden Ajeng Kartini, Indonesian women who lived at the turn of the century did not voice their personal experiences and they did not commit their life stories to paper, either in personal documents or in fiction. We do not know what they went through as *nyais*, serving white masters in all respects, entirely at the mercy of their capriciousness. These women bore children who were Eurasian and who were often taken away from them for a Dutch education with or without their consent. What we are left with are writings by men, displaying masculine views and male fantasies. When we read those texts as women, we have to be on our *qui vive*, resisting the internalization of male norms and relying, instead, on our experiences as women.

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