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A Post-Colonial and Feminist Approach to Multatuli's *Max Havelaar*¹

The standard interpretation of the novel *Max Havelaar* written by Eduard Douwes Dekker, alias Multatuli, in 1860 is that it is a successful literary plea against colonial abuses by The Netherlands in its huge colony, the East Indies, in the second half of the nineteenth century. I also consider this work as one of the highlights of Dutch literature. It is one of the few Dutch literary works that have broken through in European literature. However, we cannot read nineteenth century Dutch (or English or French) literary works without keeping in mind that imperialism was a crucial part of cultural representation. Imperialism and colonialism were the frames of reference to the novel by Multatuli and to the author himself as well. Although the novel negotiates the abuses of colonialism in the East Indies, the text very often contradicts itself. This self-contradiction makes the text – paradoxically enough – a colonial project.

Following Said,² Ania Loomba, the literary theorist argues that each discourse is a colonial discourse.³ Categories such as class, race and gender are interwoven and permeate each other. Loomba sees parallels between the colonial imagination and the asymmetry between man and woman. Patriarchy and imperialism use parallel forms of domination on those who are subject to these systems. Land and woman form a commutable terrain where colonial power can be exercised. A post-colonial approach therefore has much in common with gender analysis.

Post-colonial and feminist literary theories give guidelines to confront our contemporary mental frameworks with that of literary works of the past. Raymond Williams calls this process unlearning: i.e. the challenging of accepted truths about canonized texts.⁴ This paper offers the results of such a challenge, the re-reading a classical literary work of the Dutch canon from a post-colonial and gender perspective.

¹ This paper is a shortened and somewhat revised version of my book *Van een afstand. Multatuli's Max Havelaar tegendraads gelezen* (Amsterdam, Antwerpen: L.J.Veen, 2001). (Supported by OTKA T/F 047131.)

² Said, Edward: *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

³ Loomba, Ania: *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London, New York: Routledge, 1998.

⁴ Williams, Raymond: *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Fontana/Croom Helm, 1976.

I have three suggestions for a new interpretation of the novel.

The first one is that *there is a synonymic relation between frame and main narrative*. Söttemann, one of the outstanding representatives of the classical interpretation⁵ considers the grotesque, philistine, profit-oriented world of Droogstoppel, the dealer in coffee in Amsterdam *as opposite* to the exotic world of the East Indies where the romantic hero, Max Havelaar heroically tries to implement humanism and justice in the colonial system. According to this interpretation the hypocritical Western imperialism of Droogstoppel and company *explains* as it were the abusive practices in the colonies. The simple-minded cruelty and pragmatism of the frame accounts for and confronts the misery depicted in the main narrative. The opposite divide is however not between Amsterdam and the East Indies, or between the two main characters, Droogstoppel and Max Havelaar, but between colonizer and colonized in all kinds of relationships, whether in Europe or elsewhere. In my view *Droogstoppel is not an opposite but a synonymic character to Max Havelaar. They are both white European men who exploit Europeans and non-Europeans – both men and women*. Imperialist exploitation is therefore not only characteristic of the frame but also of the main narrative and the several embedded sub-narratives. I call the relation between frame and main story synonymic in order to emphasize the essential sameness of the two. They are not just repetitive or parallel: these two terms would involve only stylistic means, not an immanent feature.

My second suggestion is that the novel *operates with binary oppositions spread throughout the whole text*: its tropes are very often opposing. As Said argues, the Orient has been created by the West as the 'other' whereby the Orient helped the West in its self-definition in sharp oppositions: white-colored, master-slave, we-they, colonizer-colonized, rational-emotional, civilized-barbarian, male-female. The first part of these binary oppositions always has to do with power, the European world and its positive connotations, while the second part has to do with the lack of power, the Oriental world and its negative connotations. Gayatri Spivak speaks of 'othering', by which she means the process when the dominating discourse creates its 'others'.⁶ This 'othering process' is present in the whole text, because representation in the referentiality of colonialism is basically built on difference. On the one hand we find white European men – Droogstoppel, Sjaalman, Stern, Max Havelaar *as opposed to* colored non-European men – the regent, Saidjah, and the several nameless native slaves. On the other hand we have white European women – Droogstoppel's wife and daughter

⁵ Söttemann, August L.: *De structuur van Max Havelaar*. Groningen: Wolters-Hoordhoff, 1966.

⁶ Spivak, Gayatri: *Can the subaltern speak? Speculations on widow sacrifice*. In: *Wedge* 7/8 (1985).

and their lady friends, Sjaalman's wife and the white European servants. As opposed to these we find non-European women such as Mrs Slotering, the baboe, Si Oepi Kete. But all women are opposed to men in the sense that they are subordinated to men. Urban, capitalist, civilized, modern Amsterdam also forms a contrast to the romanticized, exotic East Indies. Differences must be maintained, otherwise the borders become blurred. Blurred borders and contact zones mean danger to colonizers.

My third suggestion is that the text of the novel has several isomorphic structures. According to Douglas Hofstadter: "The word 'isomorphism' applies when two complex structures can be mapped onto each other, in such a way that to each part of one structure there is a corresponding part in the other structure, where 'corresponding' means that the two parts play similar roles in their respective structures."⁷ In the novel *Max Havelaar* several segments have such an isomorphic character, a smaller part reflecting a wider network of relations.

One such isomorphic element is *mud*. In the first chapter about the East Indies we read about the road which connects Pandeglang with Lebak. This road is described as muddy where it is almost impossible to reach one's destination with a four-in-hand. The coach gets stuck again and again in the all-pervading mud. In contrast there is the highroad built by natives according to the plan of the Dutch marshal Daendels. The road built of stone is 'culture' brought along by the white European *as opposed to* the mud of the native landscape as 'nature'. 'Mud' has thus an isomorphic aspect. It also refers to the structure of Sjaalman's manuscript. Because of the several foreign words of the native language scattered throughout the text, the reader of the manuscript, Stern has similar difficulties to 'go' through, in order to properly understand it, like the people on the road from Pandeglang to Lebak. Not only the manuscript is a 'muddy road' for the European reader, the structure of the novel itself repeats this 'muddy' character: it is a labyrinth of several genres such as essays, letters, poems. The colony by its chaotic and muddy character resists the white European intruder. 'Mud' mirrors the asymmetric situation between colonizer and colonized. It illustrates the distance between the European approach to grasp and the passively resisting colonized world by way of showing the latter as a muddy labyrinth, not only in reality but also as a text.

Another isomorphism is that of the older and younger brother or parent and child. The colonial situation is represented as *parens patriae*. The role of the older brother or the parent is attached to Max Havelaar while the Regent – the native exploiter of his own fellow-countrymen – has the role of the younger brother or the child. In the story Max Havelaar is actually younger than the regent. Isomor-

⁷ Hofstadter, Douglas: Gödel, Escher, Bach. New York: Basic Books, 1979, p. 49.

phism here is that of the colonial hierarchy: the older brother has more knowledge, more power and more responsibility than his younger brother. Frantz Fanon convincingly shows how this paternalist way of communication between white and black people still endures in the era of decolonization.⁸ The relation between parent and child, or older and younger brother is isomorphic in another sense as well. At the end of the novel *Multatuli*, the actual author – the true subject (read: child) of his monarch – pushes his fictional characters aside and takes up the pen himself in order to make his plea to the King of Holland, Willem III – the pre-eminent father-figure.

Still another isomorphism is ‘manuscript’. Sjaalman, the poor man who has just returned from the East Indies has a manuscript of his own notes, essays, poems and other writings about his experiences on the Dutch colony. This is the package that he delegates to Droogstoppel, the prototype of the Dutch philistine in order to make a coherent book out of it. Droogstoppel on his turn gives the package of loose papers to his accountant, the German young man, Stern. He is the one who edits the text of the main story about Havelaar with its own subordinated texts. This structure is a *mise en abyme*: all the (sub)texts reflect each other and all subtexts are mirrored by the whole novel and vice versa. The novel *Max Havelaar as a whole* is not only a text *about*, but also a text *of* colonialism: its textual elements also have a colonial relationship. The frame colonizes the main narrative in the first place by telling it. The activity of narrating situates the main narrative in the passive voice: it is narrated. The main narrative in its turn is colonizing several other embedded subtexts, for example the sub-story about Saidjah and Adinda, by embedding the subtext and making its two native protagonists mute. D. H. Lawrence, who wrote a foreword to the English translation called this complicated structure of the book ‘the greatest mess possible’. However, ‘this mess’ shows a very well defined system. All the above mentioned elements are isomorphic: they refer to the binary *oppositions* between colonizer and colonized and have a textual aspect at the same time.

The concept of the ‘Colonizer’ and the ‘colonized’ can be also applied to the relationship between men and women.

In the frame of nineteenth-century Holland and in the main narrative of the East Indies women are all subordinated to men. ‘Woman’ is an icon of the colonial system: she – white or colored – is colonized by him, white or colored.

Loomba argues that from the beginning of European colonization upper class Oriental women are always represented in texts as being carefully watched over and defended by European men. Mrs. Slotering, ‘a native child’, the pregnant

⁸ “A white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child and starts smirking, whispering, patronizing, cozening.” (Fanon, Frantz: *Black Skin White Masks*. Trans. by Charles Lam Markmann. London, Sydney: Pluto Press, 1986, p. 31.)

widow of Havelaar's predecessor is guarded by the Havelaars. She is staying at their house. She is a 'liplap', someone with mixed blood and as such a 'contact zone': she is someone who belongs to both sides and is therefore dangerous to the colonizer. A liplap is too similar to the white European, yet preserving differences between colonizer and colonized is essential to the preservation of colonial domination. Women on different sides of the colonial divide can therefore never develop solidarity with each other in spite of their common subjugation by their husbands. That is why Tine, Havelaar's wife behaves quite belligerently with Mrs. Slotering, the half-breed, the liplap. Although the Havelaars take good care of Mrs. Slotering, she and her unborn child mean a latent danger to them, the colonizers. A liplap is also an example of 'miscegenation', the sexual mixing of two different races. Mixing of races, blurring borders means an undermining, and a destabilizing of the colonizing power. Liplaps are excluded from the social life of the colonies partly because of their lack of command of the colonizers' language. They only know the Malay language. They are repeatedly laughed at because of their faulty usage of Dutch. But there is not one scene in the novel in which the Dutch are laughed at by the natives because of *their* bad Malay language. The Dutch laugh, the natives are laughed at. Again, the concept 'liplap' has an isomorphic character.

Another statement by Loomba is that in colonial literature it is always the European subject who is individualized. Non-Europeans are represented as agents of a race or of another group. Therefore their problems are never seen from their own individual perspective.

A case here in the main narrative is that of the native nurse, the baboe. When Max Havelaar, his family and other European authorities arrive at Lebak, everybody getting out of the coach is described in detail. The baboe is however not worth describing. The narrator tells us that all the baboes of the East Indies are the same when they are old. If the reader knows one of them, there is no need to describe her. And if the reader does not know such a person, it is impossible to describe them. We have to bear in mind that Multatuli wrote his novel on the abuse of colonizers in the East Indies. His viewpoint is however that of the colonizer who is actually not interested in and not cognizant of the colonized. The baboe has no face and she is not more than her kind. She is not worth to be described as an individual. She represents a fourfold discrimination: that of her race (she is a native of the East Indies), that of her class (she is a servant), that of her sex (she is a woman) and that of her age (she is old). This is a good example, how class, sex, race and age are all part of the omnipresent ideology of the colonial context. It also shows how representation or more precisely the omitting of representation can serve the aims of colonial power.

Another example of the parallels between colonial and gender aspects is the episode when Max Havelaar tells Si Oepi Ketch the story of the Japanese mason. Si Oepi Ketch is a young girl, the daughter of a native magistrate. Havelaar tries

to talk to her, but she is quite resistant. In her answers she shows her dependency on her father and her masters. The story of the Japanese mason is a parable. Havelaar tells the story to the uncommunicative girl in order to solve the awkward situation in which he tries to create contact with a colonized person who rejects the approach. The story is about the Japanese mason who is never satisfied with his own position and always wishes to be someone or something else. In the end he wants to be what he was: a mason. This is a typical colonial story: the desire of the colonized to be free is just an illusion. The reserved behavior of the young girl who has to listen to this story which is actually her own, is interpreted by Havelaar as stupid but also as a latent protest. That is why Havelaar is very irritated with the girl. He says that in every young girl he sees an unwritten manuscript. The unwritten manuscript to be written by men. The story of the Japanese mason is also the story of the relationship of the philistine Droogstoppel to his wife: one always has to stay in his or her position. Here again we have a *mise en abyme*. Women – white as Tine, Havelaar's wife, half-breed as Mrs Slotering or colored as Si Oepi Ketch – may only have the desire to become free, but their desire can never be formulated, much less fulfilled: they have to stay in their place to the end of time. Tine, Mrs Droogstoppel, Si Oepi Ketch and Adinda do not have a text. They are all unwritten manuscripts that only men can fill with a text.

If the colony is text, a woman is text as well. The text 'woman' is written, constructed, dominated and manipulated by men. Woman characters only seldom get the chance to speak. The amount of the direct and indirect speech of female characters is practically zero compared to that of men. The story is about men written for men. Women are embedded in a male story. All female characters are variations on the same theme of subjugation: Droogstoppel's wife is cutting flannels for her husband. Tine, Havelaar's wife helps her husband's career and looks after their son. Adinda, the native lover of the native boy, Saidjah promises to spin and to weave until the boy returns. Droogstoppel's daughter, Marie embroiders slippers for her father's young German assistant, Stern. The servants, the native nurse and Si Oepi Ketch are exploited economically. They do not have a word in their own or their husbands' lives. The actual and textual subjection of natives and women forms a coherent and structural network in the novel.

As Van Alphen and Meijer point out, the great Dutch masterworks have the flavor of sanctity around them. These are texts the cultural value of which is never challenged.⁹ Generations of literary scholars confirm the value of the novel *Max Havelaar*. Their interpretations have become just as canonized as the book itself.

⁹ Alphen, Ernst van; Meijer, Maaïke (Eds.): *De canon onder vuur*. Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1991.

The same flavor of sanctity is at the same time the weakness of canonized masterworks. They are not a challenge any more. By breaking up the text one can discover hidden trains of thought and colonial reflexes. I have found several points in the text that sanction a world view with which the reader of today does not wish to identify.

In my reading Droogstoppel and Max Havelaar are the two sides of the same coin being the Dutch colonial enterprise. The complicated structure of the novel works as a centrifuge: it induces a fast rotary motion where all the narrating instances are forced into a sequence where their identities have more and more similar features. In the middle of the circle there is a vacuum. This vacuum represents the missing voice of the colony – in this case the East Indies – and in close relation to it, the missing voice of women.