Madame Butterfly in a Robinson-Reading:

A note of discord in colonial Indonesia[1]

Research > Southeast Asia

In the face of the recent developments in Indonesia, it almost appears ignorant (and certainly very much against the trend) to do research on literature, even more so if dealing with texts that date back to the colonial period and earlier. I am convinced, however, that a crucial prerequisite for understanding the present lies in an appropriate reflection upon the past. *Madame Butterfly* prompts associations with opera, Italian lyrics, and refined tunes, with box-office hits such as the musical *Miss Saigon*, and, of course, with a world famous, heart-breaking romance created by Western culture. At the same time, *Madame Butterfly* represents an internationally embraced image of the dominating white man and the devoted Asian woman, a celebrated and applauded image of the naive and trustful Asian tricked and used by the superior Westerner. This is also the theme that was picked up by two indigenous authors in colonial Indonesia who retold the story from a different point of view – their point of view.

By Doris Jedamski

In 1887, the French author Julien Viaud alias Pierre Loti published the novel *Madame Chrysanthème* and created a story with a Japanese setting and colonial overtone that was to have a long-lasting impact on audiences and artists all over the world and far beyond the boundaries of literature. In 1898, John Luther Long's short story *Madame Butterfly* appeared in the US-American *Century Magazine*. David Belasco's stage version of this short story had already been a great success on Broadway when Puccini saw the theatre play in London in 1900. Four years later, his opera of the same title was staged in Milan, although not received well. The reworked version, presented shortly afterwards, was to become the world success it is today.

The subject matter of love and (forced) marriage was first popularized in colonial Indonesia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by the so-called *nyai* stories. These were primarily based on newspaper reports of real events and then fictionalized mostly by Eurasian writers. The heroines of these stories were young indigenous women or girls who had been sold off by their fathers, often enough out of poverty and despair, to become mistresses of well-paying European or Chinese men. The tragic heroine Madame Butterfly revived the *nyai* theme and gave it new impulses.

The indigenous adaptations viewed the relationship between colonizer and colonized from a slightly shifted angle, although, linked to the discourses on modernization and women's emancipation, the free choice of partner remained the focus of the debate. This is not at all to say that these texts advocated women's liberation or the equal rights of both sexes. In fact, most (Sino-) Malay men had only very little sympathy for such modern ideas, which threatened their position of power within the indigenous gender hierarchy. Male writers regularly created heroines who, if they did not clearly distance themselves from the "evil" impact of Westernization, would endure misery and meet a tragic end (often death). As in other cultural contexts, the female body also served as foil for the confusion, fears, and anxieties of the male part of society. In the colonial context, however, these novels also provoked a surrogate discourse, which was directed against the colonizing power.

It is not yet known whether it was through Loti's novel or Puccini's opera, through recordings, radio broadcasts, by way of stage performances, or through oral reports or printed reviews that the story of Madame Butterfly reached colonial Indonesia. When, in May 1933, the multi-talented Chinese-Malay Njoo Cheong Seng published a four-page summary of *Madame Butterfly* in the Sino-Malay journal *Liberty*, he was probably already working on his theatre adaptation of the theme. The famous *stamboel* theatre group *Dardanella Opera* performed the play *Raden Adjeng Moerhia* around 1933/1934, starring the author's wife, Fifi Young, as the young Javanese, Western-educated woman Raden Adjeng Moerhia. According to the (admittedly limited) documentation of *stamboel* theatre activities of the time, the play was often and successfully performed throughout Indonesia.

It is even harder to obtain reliable data concerning the reception of the 87-page novel which appeared under the same title in March 1934 in a Sino-Malay "Penny Dreadful" (*roman majalah*). The text perfectly translates all crucial structural elements of the Western model into the context of colonial Indonesia at the beginning of the twentieth century. The focus, however, is shifted from the individual tragedy of a single woman to the story of a family and, in fact, a whole community. The author composed this adaptation to be a warning to all indigenous women, as he explicitly states in the foreword: "This book has been respectfully put together for the young Indonesian women who are at present happily busy competing in the wave of modernism, hoping to achieve their highest ideals. But don't you breach the boundary of our sacred East-Ness, because, as Kipling said: East remains East, West remains West, and they will never meet." In the course of the story, the heroine voluntarily and against the will of her family becomes a young Dutchman's mistress (*nyai*) to endure, in the end, the same fate as Madame Butterfly. *Raden Adjeng Moerhia* is an openly critical and anti-colonial text that champions the ideology that East and West are not compatible. It can only be guessed as to why Dutch authorities did not intervene and why this highly counter-discoursive text was not subjected to censorship, as it was usually the case with films or critical press and book publications.

Njoo Choeng Seng's second adaptation of *Madame Butterfly* was first came

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Book cover of the novel *Raden Adjeng Moerhia, by Njoo Cheong Seng, published in 1934*

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out as stage play, as well (*Timoeriana*, between 1937 and 1939). Only in 1941, did he produce a revised book rendition of his theatre version. While Njoo Cheong Seng's first adaptation, *Raden Adjeng Moerhia*, can clearly be classified as *nyai*-story, his second adaptation takes on the character of an ethnographic text with an exotic ambience. It is no longer set in the midst of the Javanese community in colonial Sumatra (which is already noteworthy), but given a place on the periphery far away from the colonial centre, however, not yet *outside* the colonized world: Dilly, on the island of Timor.

It is remarkable enough that one Western text would inspire an indigenous author to produce not only one adaptation, but also four variations of the same theme (two novels and two stage adaptations). It is just as remarkable that, in 1939, and apparently in response to Njoo Cheong Seng's theatrical version, the Sumatran Islamic writer Sahiboe'l Hikajat came forward with his own adaptation of *Madame Butterfly*. It is conceivable that it was this "Medan novel" entitled *Antara Doea Doenia* ("Between Two Worlds") that provoked Njoo Cheong Seng also to publish his book version of *Timoriana*. For reasons still unknown, he used his pen name Monsieur d'Amour and explicitly labelled the novel a *Timoreesche Fantasie*.

It does not take much scrutiny to see that Sahiboe'l Hikajat's novel *Antara Doea Doenia* was heavily inspired by the Sino-Malay theatre play *Timoeriana*. The resemblance of the structure of the plot and the correspondence of many narrative elements is striking, to list only two:

1 **Both heroes are Englishmen and named Anthony/Tony (in the Western version Pinkerton is an USA naval officer).**

2 **In both indigenous versions, the protagonist falls in love with the chief's daughter, but in the end he leaves her, although reluctantly, in order to return to London (Pinkerton rents a house "including" Geisha with the intention of returning to his American wife at the end of his five years of service).**

Most strikingly, both indigenous versions suggest a *Robinson Crusoe*-reading or, to be more precise, an anti-*Robinson Crusoe*-reading. It seems that the indigenous adaptations of *Madame Butterfly* also hold a delayed response to Von de Wall's "adapted translation" of *Robinson Crusoe*, which came out in 1875 and was reprinted many times. The *Madame Butterfly* adaptations finally perform the change of perspective that Von de Wall could not yet carry out. The perspective of the ignorant, superior, white male with the attitude of a colonizer is literally turned around. The "camera" is now resting on Tony/"Robinson" as the object; no longer is he in control of the situation; he is even no longer in control of his perception or the narration. In the Western version of *Madame Butterfly*, Pinkerton arrives on board of a battleship to be stationed in town – just like a conqueror. In both indigenous versions the hero is shipwrecked and stranded on a remote island, the sole survivor, unconscious, absolutely helpless and passive, exactly like Robinson Crusoe. Only, when these Robinsons regain consciousness, they find that the island is not theirs to explore and to occupy. On the contrary, both heroes are found and rescued by a "native tribe".

The proposed "Robinson reading" implies a strong anti-colonial message. It is the "dark-skinned native" who saves the stranded white man. It is not the white man who is in control but the indigenous community. He is not the master but merely a guest. It is the white man who has to adjust and who has to learn from his host. The power relation between colonizer and colonized is not only negated but, in fact, reversed. Both indigenous authors present a "corrected" vision of the colonial situation: the white "intruder", singularized, is confronted with the well-functioning indigenous community. He may stay, provided that he accepts and follows the given rules.

It is, alas, the indigenous woman who now takes Friday's place as the dependent, obedient, and devoted native. Only, her bond with the white man is not based on inferiority and moral debt but on love. The heroine's love for the white man is assessed discrepantly by the authors. In accordance with his stage version of *Timoeriana* (and his first adaptation *Raden Adjeng Moerhia*), Njoo Cheong Seng still refuses to allow the intercultural relation a promising future. The Sumatran Malay text, however, never doubts the rightfulness of Tony and the heroine's relationship. She does not have to wait in vain for her lover; being tired of Western civilization, he eventually returns to her – happily ending in perfect Hollywood style.

A first comparison of *Timoeriana* and *Antara Doea Doenia* suggests that both authors actively began to use certain literary devices: the perspective the narrative takes and the literary figure each function to convey the authors' visions of a future Indonesian society and to redefine both their own position as well as their view of the colonizer's future standing. In contrast to *Robinson Crusoe* and *Madame Butterfly*, these adaptations also construe a subject unable to exist outside the firm structures of family and community. Both texts unanimously refuse to see the individual as an autonomous unity but deal with the subject as but one factor within the bigger scheme.

***Dr Doris Jedamski** is specialized in comparative literary and cultural studies with a regional focus on Indonesia. She is an affiliated research fellow at the IIAS, Leiden, currently completing a monograph (also Habilitation thesis) on adaptations of Western popular novels in colonial Indonesia.*

E-mail: D.Jedamski@let.leidenuniv.nl or Doris.Jedamski@t-online.de

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