

Feminism and the Indonesian Nationalist Movement:  
A Reading of Soewarsih Djojopoespito's Novel  
*Buiten het Gareel*

C. W. WATSON

ABSTRAK

*Novel Soewarsih yang bersifat autobiografi dalam bahasa Belanda ini memerikan kesukaran yang dihadapi orang Indonesia yang terdidik dalam bahasa Belanda dan yang terlibat dalam gerakan nasionalis menentang Belanda pada akhir tahun 1930an. Ia menceritakan khususnya peranan yang dimainkan wanita dalam gerakan itu dan bagaimana teman lelaki mereka mengambil sikap ambivalen terhadap mereka. Dari segi isi dan pembinaannya, novel ini mencerminkan perasaan krisis generasi pertama orang Indonesia yang terdedah kepada kebudayaan Belanda/ Eropah yang mereka kenali tetapi perlu mereka tolak pada waktu yang sama. Bergantung pada penelitian tek yang berkenaan dan juga rujukan kepada karya kritikan berkenaan penulis dan juga tempoh masa itu, rencana ini menunjukkan bagaimana Soewarsih dengan sengaja menggunakan novel untuk menyuarakan rasa kecewa dirinya sebagai wanita dan juga mempersembahkan testimoni dirinya tentang suasana dan peristiwa pada masa itu. Ia juga menghujahkan bahawa dalam semua pembacaan pasca kolonial kita mesti berhati-hati ketika menggunakan sumber yang bersifat autobiografi dan juga novel semasa untuk membina semula persepsi kita tentang masa lampau, malahan perlu memastikan bahawa, bila membaca teks seumpama ini, juga digunakan kebolehan kritikal sastera, antropologi dan sejarah.*

*Kata kunci: Nasionalisme Indonesia, gerakan wanita, novel yang bersifat autobiografi, Soewarsih Djojopoespito*

ABSTRACT

*Soewarsih's autobiographical novel written in Dutch describes the difficulties facing Dutch educated Indonesians involved in the anti-Dutch nationalist movement in the late 1930s. It deals specifically with the role which women played within the movement and how their male counterparts took an ambivalent attitude towards them. In terms of its subject matter and its construction the novel reflects the sense of crisis of the first generation of Indonesians to have been exposed to Dutch/European culture with which they identified but which at the same time they felt they had to repudiate. Relying on a close reading of*

*the text and references to critical works dealing with the author and the period, this article demonstrates how Soewarsih deliberately uses the novel both to give voice to her personal frustrations as a woman and to offer personal testimony of the atmosphere and events of the times. It also argues through this example that in all our postcolonial reading we must be cautious when we make use of autobiographical sources and contemporary novels to reconstruct perceptions of the past, and we need to ensure that, when reading the texts, we employ literary, anthropological and historical critical skills in equal measure.*

*Key words: Indonesian nationalism, women's movement, autobiographical novel, Soewarsih Djojopoespito*

## INTRODUCTION

*Buiten het Gareel (Out of Harness)* is an autobiographical novel written by an Indonesian woman, Soewarsih Djojopoespito, in 1939. It relates the difficulties, political, social and personal, faced by an idealistic Dutch educated Indonesian elite desperately struggling to raise nationalist consciousness while having deliberately opted out of the promising careers potentially open to them if they had cooperated with the Dutch colonial state - the harness of the title. Inspired by democratic ideas and the importance of education for their fellow-countrymen, many of them had turned to the running of small schools outside the colonial education system. Since they made no secret of their nationalist sentiments they were under constant surveillance by the Dutch authorities, and individuals were frequently arrested and interrogated and were then put under a teaching ban. From 1934 onwards, there had been a significant change in the colonial government's attitude of relative tolerance towards the expression of political opinions and the activities of political parties and, very much as in India at the time, the colonial authorities had decided to come down heavily on political freedoms: party political leaders had been arrested and sent into exile and obstacles were constantly put in the way of those running the so-called "wild schools."

The experiences of the central figures of the novel, Soelastri and her husband Soedarmo, which are described as taking place over a five year period between 1933 and 1938 faithfully mirror those of Soewarsih herself and her husband, Soegondo. We also know from external evidence, if nothing else, that other major characters in the book, including Marti, Soelastri's elder sister who is heavily involved in the organisation of a progressive women's organisation, must also be taken as direct representations of specific individuals in the small world of the Dutch educated intellectual elite of the time. In addition some figures appear in their own right, in particular Soekarno, the colourful acknowledged leader of the nationalist movement, under constant scrutiny by the Dutch PID, the intelligence bureau, and, during the period covered by the

book, himself to be arrested and exiled. Clearly, then, *Buiten het Gareel* is a roman 'a clef (Termorshuizen 1986: 225), but the intense introspection through which the personalities of the two central characters are analysed suggests that it is much more than this, and that we should search for the intention of the novel beyond a simple narrative of the social and political circumstances of the period. A strong hint of how we should read it comes from a knowledge of the circumstances under which it was written: in particular we need to be aware of the influential guidance given to Soewarsih by the Dutch writer, Edgar Du Perron (Termorshuizen 2001).

Du Perron was one of the major Dutch literary figures of the twentieth century of the inter-war period, but he is unfortunately little known outside the Dutch-speaking world. Born and brought up in the colonial world of the Indies he continued to identify with that world for the rest of his life. Unlike the situation in India where expatriates had for the most very little genuine knowledge of native society, the situation in the Dutch East Indies where there was a high percentage of resident Dutch expatriates led to the development of a so-called Indisch sub-culture, a unique synthesis of Dutch and native cultural formation. Numerous accounts of this distinctive expatriate culture are to be found not only in the historical and sociological accounts of the period, but also in the numerous publications of a popular and sophisticated level which have been and continue to be written by Dutch writers. A critical factor in the development of this Indisch culture was the availability of excellent Dutch secondary schools for the expatriate community which obviated the necessity of sending children back to the "mother country". In these circumstances, then, Dutch children experienced a long formative part of their lives in the Indies to which they became profoundly attached and with which they identified for the rest of their lives, as the memoirs which many of them wrote testify. This again makes their experience critically different from that of their British counterparts in India. Du Perron had had just such a formative Dutch education in the tropics and had come to respect and admire the Indonesian friends he had made. However, very few Indonesians had such access to Dutch medium education - and indeed Dutch colonial education policy had deliberately restricted the number of schools offering such opportunities. Thus, people like Soewarsih and her husband were members of a very small elite group in which, as one might have expected, women were not strongly represented.

After a long period in Europe where moving in literary circles in Paris he had become something of a man of letters and had struck up a warm relationship with André Malraux among others, Du Perron returned to the Indies in 1933 (Snoek 1990). By that time he was already the author of his outstanding autobiographical novel *Het Land van Herkomst* (*The Land of Origin*). Among the Dutch and Indonesians whom he met, he sought out for friendship those who shared his passion for literature, his strong anti-fascist views and a commitment to extending greater political freedom to Indonesia. It was in these

circumstances that he was introduced to Soewarsih in 1938. At that time she and her husband were living in very straitened circumstances in Bandung. Soewarsih herself was at a particularly low ebb since a novel she had written in Sundanese (the language of the indigenous population of West Java) had just been returned to her by the Dutch colonial publisher for popular literature, Balai Pustaka. Du Perron, very much in sympathy with her and her friends, persuaded them to become part of a circle of like-minded Dutch and Indonesian intellectuals who clustered round a newly formed cultural journal *Kritiek en Opbouw* (Dolk 1993). Moreover, he warmly encouraged Soewarsih to persist with her literary ambitions but to write not in Sundanese but in Dutch, the language in which she and her friends conversed.

In following Du Perron's advice, Soewarsih took a decisive step in breaking with what had by then become established precedent. There had been only three Indonesian writers who had published anything substantial in Dutch: Kartini, the daughter of a Javanese aristocrat, had written long letters to Dutch friends some of which after her death had been published in an edited version and widely read (Kartini 1911); a Javanese minor royal figure, Notosuroto, had written some lyrical oriental verses inspired by Tagore (Kerdijk 2002) and a Sundanese aristocrat, Djajadiningrat, had written an important memoir (Watson 2000: 38-69). There had, however, been no novels for several reasons: there was not a sufficiently large reading public to provide a market for Dutch language novels about Indonesian experience, and from about 1914 onwards those Indonesians who might have been able to write in Dutch had made the decision to write for an Indonesian language reading public because of a desire to use the novel as a vehicle for the communication of new political and cultural ideas, and because it provided a potential way of supplementing what was in some cases a very meagre income. This was the thinking, for example, inspiring the influential group of writers who had in 1934 established the literary journal *Pudjangga Baru* and it was had prompted Soewarsih - as described through the filter of her heroine Soelastri's experience - to write her novel in Sundanese. By deciding to write a novel in Dutch about her own social milieu, then, Soewarsih was treading new ground.

For her this seems to have been personally liberating since she was able to write more fluently and spontaneously in a language, the structures and vocabulary of which were those she naturally turned to to express her ideas – even though to some Dutch ears the idiom is not quite *echt*. By comparison, other novels of the period (with the possible exception of one, Armijn Pané's *Belenggu*) written in Malay/ Indonesian about the same elite group and dealing with similar issues - the novel *Layar Terkembang*, for instance - are stilted and awkward. The wooden Indonesian approximations of the Dutch which the characters of that group would have been speaking to each other do not easily allow the essential suspension of disbelief required for what are intended to be realist novels.

However, although the decision to write in Dutch may have been liberating, it had inevitable consequences for the potential range of readers the novel could reach. Du Perron who had returned to the Netherlands in 1939 found a publisher for it there and with an introduction written by him it came out in 1940, shortly before the German invasion of the Netherlands and Du Perron's death - he died as news of the Dutch surrender came through. It was not an auspicious time and the book did not receive much notice in the Dutch press (Termorshuizen 2001: 16-18). There were subsequent editions after the war, the latest in 1986, with an afterword by Dr Gerard Termorshuizen who had got to know Soewarsih in her old age in the 70s and had championed her writing. In Indonesia the novel never really became known. A chapter from it appeared in *Pudjangga Baru* in 1941, but as far as I know it did not receive much comment, although presumably those who recognised themselves in its pages must have had something to say. We know that Soewarsih's sister was very hurt by the novel. (Snoek 1990: 317 notes 115 and 116) In Indonesia too, this was an inauspicious time to be publishing, and the novel was forgotten in the political maelstrom following the beginning of the Pacific War and the Japanese invasion. There might have been some expectation that after 1950 when an independent Indonesia began to write its own history of the successful nationalist struggle and triumph over the Dutch and promoted that account through curricula in schools, then room would have been found for at least a mention of *Buiten het Gareel* as part of that movement but the opportunity was not taken. By contrast, for example, the nationalist history book of Soewarsih's brother-in-law, A.K. Pringgodigdo, who plays an ambivalent role in the novel, was adopted as a standard text. Soewarsih and her husband had been sidelined from the political centre by that time, and even though other members of the political group to which she belonged, the PSI party clustered around the charismatic Sutan Sjahrir, became well-known figures she herself never rose to prominence. For her and her husband the promise of the earlier years was never fulfilled, and they both seem to have been disappointed at the outcome of political events of the immediate post independence years (Termorshuizen 2001: 20).

It was not until 1975 that their fortunes revived slightly. Thanks to a grant from the Dutch government, Soewarsih was able to translate her novel into Indonesian, under the title *Manusia Bebas (Mankind Free)*. She went about the task with great enthusiasm since it appeared to offer a new lease of life to the novel and renewed her expectations that it might become a testimony to the struggles of herself and her friends at a critical historical period. There was some publicity given to the publication, but again the time was not right: the publishing of literary works in Indonesia was only just beginning to pick up again after a dry period of about ten years. Readers were interested in new material, not in the pre-war novels, at least not unless they were school texts. A second edition was published in 2000, and since, after the fall of Suharto, there has been a great revival of interest in the history of nationalism and "forgotten"

figures on the left, this may be an indication that at last the novel will receive the credit it deserves.

Until perhaps very recently, then, within Indonesia *Buiten het Gareel* has never had the readership it merits, and even among Dutch readers very few know of it. But, Soewarsih must have been conscious from the outset that she could not anticipate a wide readership, so what in fact had she expected from it? To answer that question we can usefully turn to clues in the text in the last chapter of the novel where the narrator pauses in the reconstruction of her memories and comments on her writing.

*“Soelastri was disturbed by the tears which came to her eyes. Why was there always this dreadful sentimentality? She who wanted to be one of the champions of women’s rights in Indonesia, who indeed was one of them, could she not look back on her memories calmly and with composure, set them down on paper and in so doing and have done with it for good?”* (p242) and this is picked up later when she recalls her first attempt to write the earlier Sundanese novel and her reaction to the criticisms of her sister who condemned her commitment to the nationalist cause:

*Must then also the whole nationalist movement, fumbling as it was, and so often halted in its progress, be reckoned simple stupidity, she had asked herself, and were all those people of principle in the nationalist movement really simply doomed to defeat? Then she had pulled herself together again and began to be ashamed of her weakness. To distract her self she had begun, in Loerni’s garden, under the jamboe trees where the butterflies fluttered about her to write a Sundanese novel. She was trying to drive away her sadness, but it only half worked. But that had been the beginning, Soelastri now thought, of what she was at that moment engaged in doing: writing down her memories in order to be free of them. (246)*

It would, of course, be naive to assume that these sentiments – wanting to purge herself through writing - express the totality of the desire underlying the writing of the novel: for one thing it is the narrator rather than the author who writes the words here, and for another it is well established that even the most secret writings have an intended or implicit readership beyond that of the writer herself. Nevertheless, it would be equally wrong to dismiss these statements altogether. Soewarsih is writing a novel altogether different from anything else which had appeared in Indonesia. In terms of its intense focus on autobiographical experience the only comparable novels are Du Perron’s *Het Land van Herkomst* (which was undoubtedly some sort of model for her) and Multatuli’s *Max Havelaar* - also for Soewarsih a source of inspiration (Dolk 1993: 24 citing Termorshuizen). The close attention to the development of the relationship of the central couple against the background of a series of difficult personal circumstances requires, it seems, not just recollection but a construction of events. It is through the act of writing that Soewarsih comes to understand the trajectory of her experience or rather, to put it another way, is able to stand

back and to evaluate the experience and is therefore able to put it behind her. Later, we shall see what is entailed in that evaluation; but for the moment I want simply to note that for Soewarsih the satisfaction of writing is here conceived as end in itself. Nonetheless, there is also that secret voice which the narrator honestly acknowledges for the reader right at the end of the novel *Was het voor Indonesie dat ze geschreven had?* (*Was it for Indonesia that she had written?*)

Du Perron's prompting to Soewarsih to write in Dutch had meant, then, that she was freed to write intimately about her own personality and those of her friends and relatives. She was not constrained by having to imagine a readership in an Indonesian language. Nor did she have to face the difficulties, which she describes in a short passage referring to her efforts at translation from Dutch into Sundanese, of grappling with making her prose conform to Indonesian rather than Dutch sentence structures. The novel makes clear that she had had literary ambitions from early on in her life and had written some verse - presumably in Dutch but this is not stated explicitly. Du Perron's influence was equally important, however, in relation to the form and structure of the novel which he persuaded her to write. By introducing her to his own writing he showed her how it was possible to create out of her own experience or, better, out of reflections on her own experience a narrative which would both render an account of her times and the involvement of her circle of friends in creating the history of those times, and at the same time be an instrument for exploring the potential of the novel as literature to move beyond simple realism (or didacticism) towards a revelation of experience which would otherwise remain inchoate and unrealised.

In *Het Land van Herkomst*, Du Perron had written a remarkable novel, part Bildungsroman, part autobiographical meditation, in which he had movingly described his boyhood in Java and his later years in Europe and the social milieu in which his family and friends had lived. Inspired by the example of Stendhal's *La Vie de Henry Brulard*, he had set out, not to write a historical document, meticulously plotted in strict chronological fashion, nor to describe the gradual growth to psychological maturity of his hero, Artur Ducroo. Instead, like Stendhal, he constantly shifts the chronological perspective of the narration from the time of the writing to the time of the events, thus compelling the reader to be aware of the constructedness of the narrative and the continuing significance of the memory of the events for the writer's sense of self and his personal judgments of others. For Du Perron, at least in this novel it should be said in his general conduct as an intellectual, contingent historical and political circumstances are important only in so far as they provide the context for intellectual and moral negotiations in the dialectic of a relationship with friends. Through defining as closely as he can the material, intellectual and emotional circumstances which determine the quality of the relationship in each of the encounters, he hopes to establish and then fix his own judgements and

evaluations, rescuing them from the flux of on-going indeterminacy. At the same time, through drawing readers' attention to the artifice by which this account of others is constantly being shaped he puts them sufficiently in possession of the process of arriving at judgements so that his narrative too is open to scrutiny.

It is this structural model which he bequeaths to Soewarsih. The disregard for chronology, the detailed description and analysis of carefully reconstructed scenes, graphically presented to the reader in their novelistic immediacy, followed by leaps in the linear sequence of the plot, the evaluations of character and personality, the play between the personalities of heroine, narrator and author, all derive from Du Perron's example. The principal difference in Soewarsih's technique is the further development of the device of rendering the other characters of the novel through the perceptions of the heroine Soelastri. Whereas Du Perron provides for readers the necessary biographical details which the realistic conventions of the writing require, Soewarsih is happy to omit almost all of these in the interests of an intense focus on the individual scene as mediated through the consciousness of Soelastri. This leads, as has frequently been pointed out, to a series of hiatuses in the plot and in the description of the contemporary historical circumstance, which sometimes makes it difficult for readers unfamiliar with the context of the time to keep pace with the narration. The advantage of the method, however, is that readers are compelled never to lose focus on the narrator on whom they are entirely dependent. This consequently permits Soewarsih to draw the readers' sympathy deep into the emotions and reflections of Soelastri enabling us to understand how the apparent idiosyncrasies of her individual judgements have been developed within a patterning of experience in which gender, class, ethnicity, education and cultural orientation all play their part.

The novel opens with a description of the circumstances which lead to the decision to write the novel: Soewarsih and her husband, Soedarmo, discuss the publisher's rejection of a manuscript of a novel in Sundanese and Soelastri is persuaded to write again but this time in Dutch. What she begins to write is an account of the previous five years beginning with her arrival in Bandung to assist her husband in the running of a wild school. Because no concessions are made to the reader's ignorance, we are left to discover as best we can that the period is 1933, and the nationalist movement is in severe crisis. The followers of the nationalist party, the PNI, which had been set up with such optimism under Soekarno's leadership in 1927 have suffered a series of setbacks. Soekarno had been arrested and imprisoned in 1931 and during his imprisonment the PNI membership had split into two, one side favoring limited cooperation with the Dutch the other arguing strongly against it. On his release in 1933, Soekarno after failing to reconcile the two positions has joined the new Partindo party, in the novel referred to as Partij Kebangsaan, whereas Soedarmo and his Dutch educated friends have opted for new PNI, Partij Marhaen in the novel. Despite

their differences, however, both factions are trying to work together to raise nationalist consciousness by setting up schools, publishing journals, and campaigning in women's organisations. In some cases individuals have managed to combine a secure position in the civil service with active commitment to the cause of nationalism, in others - and this is the case with Soelastris and her husband - consciously imitating Gandhi's example in India, they have chosen not to cooperate and consequently are wholly dependent on the small income they can derive from their teaching.

These differences in political persuasion and material circumstances are in large part the pivots on which the novel turns. The narrative comprises the relation of a set of episodes of short duration almost cinematic in the close-up quality of their intense focus on two or three individuals, linked only tenuously by the involvement of Soelastris in each of them. In each of these scenes, a different spotlight is thrown on the material difficulties of that circle of friends and how these difficulties affect their relationships to each other. Soedarmo, as the director of a school, is constantly under attack from his staff, and despite his every effort to confront the issues by throwing himself into them with ever more strenuous endeavours he never succeeds in winning people round to his point of view, something which Soelastris attributes to his unconscious aloofness as well as to the mean-spiritedness of those around them. At the same time, she herself is with difficulty trying to negotiate for herself a relationship with her family with which she can feel comfortable and true to herself. This means above all trying to come to some sort of accommodation with her dominant elder sister, Marti, an activist in the women's movement and a constant critic of her and her husband, but it also means taking a stand against her father, a patriarchal egotistic figure whose behaviour towards her mother Soelastris deplores but whom Marti defends. The novel is, then, an account of the constant to-ing and fro-ing of Soelastris between her commitment to her husband, his work and their friends, and her moral and psychological obligations to her natal family. Mediating the two sets of relationships is Soelastris's own sense of herself split into playing different roles as woman, wife and mother, as well as an individual independent self. Over the course of five years as Soedarmo embarks on a succession of projects each taken up with a renewed sense of enthusiasm, commitment and camaraderie only to be followed by disenchantment, disillusion and disappointment, they move from town to town in Java supported initially by friends and family and then moving again, finally coming back to Bandung. During this time, Soelastris has given birth to two daughters and the domestic constraints of being a mother have added to her difficulties. At the end of the novel, it is once more a time of new beginning. There is no guarantee that this time will be any different from the others, and indeed there is a suggestion that Soelastris recognises that this pattern of disappointment may be her destiny for the rest of her life; but in coming to terms with this rhythm of disappointments, there is a sense of accomplishment in the resignation to circumstances, as though

to confirm the words of the singer-songwriter David Ackles, “they suffer least who suffer what they choose”. Not least of her triumphs in this respect is the reaching of a new understanding of how her love for her husband enables her to come to terms with his shortcomings.

Under the gaze of postcolonial scholarship, it is tempting to read the novel for the historical evidence it provides for an understanding of the experience of colonialism, and such a reading does in fact find ample justification within the novel. Soelastri herself regards the recording of her memories as a historical document for the benefit of future generations. But, some words of caution are needed here. Autobiographical memoirs which have proved most susceptible to this kind of postcolonial analysis have in large measure been written some time after the events they describe and according to critical tropes and rhetorical strategies which have emerged only in the light of postcolonial discourse and which the autobiographies have come to mimic unconsciously. Thus, these memoirs have been filtered through a heavily tinged political lens. Even in the case of Nehru’s autobiography written before independence in 1939 there is a set of teleologically organised assumptions which require the reader to view the life described as representatively mirroring a specific historical interpretation of the events of the period. In relation to these autobiographies, then, we have come to have certain predetermined expectations which are both positivistic and naive: that they can supply us with some authentic and unmediated account of what colonialism was like; or that in cases where their value does not lie in a statement of the facts it is to be found in the degree to which the autobiographical construction of a life confirms how meaning for colonial people was constructed through a relationship of power and subordination. It is true that there has been in some quarters a strong resistance to these types of reading, not least because they deny any agency to individuals and assume a uniform and all pervasive reified colonial power, but nonetheless the ease of a simple reading of transparent facts makes it attractive, especially when one is simply searching for incidental corroboration of a thesis. Unless one proceeded very cautiously, to yield to temptation and approach *Buiten het Gareel* in this manner would be to risk disappointment, because, despite the references to the exercise of colonial power and its debilitating consequences, the novel is not offered as a documentary text of this kind. Like *Het Land van Herkomst*, it is above all a novel about the primacy of personal relationships in contributing to the quality of life, though there is implicit in that assumption an understanding that personal relationships are always constructed in the context of a politics of culture. With those thoughts in mind, then, I want to turn to seeing how we might be able to read such cultural politics from a close examination of one thematic strand of the novel, the issue of how to respond to competing definitions of woman’s identity.

Throughout the novel there are explicit references to the women’s movement, especially that group within it led by Marti and her friends, called in the novel, *Perempuan Insaf (The Aware Woman)* directly corresponding to

the real organisation, *Isteri Sedar* (*The Conscious Woman/Wife*), and Soelastri is conscious of her obligations as a privileged and educated woman to participate in the initiatives which the movement proposes, although she resists being drawn into it in any organisational capacity. One of the major issues being addressed by the movement at that time was polygamy the incidence of which, as well as of serial marriage and divorce, was very high, leading to a great deal of hardship for women. Mention of this occurs frequently within the novel. But, beyond these explicit references, and at a much more compelling level for the reader, is the examination of what the taking up of a woman's role means to Soelastri in a variety of strongly gendered capacities, as daughter, sister, wife, mother and friend. There is not the space here to develop an account of each of these roles as they are self-consciously acted out and reflected upon by Soelastri with a frankness which often leaves the reader with any knowledge of the conventions of communication in the historical, cultural and social circumstances of the time gasping with surprise - when for example Soelastri describes, in what we must recall as explicit autobiographical narration, her distaste for her husband and her sexual attraction to one of their friends. Some sense of the nuances and ambivalence which characterise the general nature of this introspective enquiry into her personality can, however, be grasped from a close reading of a scene in the novel where several of Soelastri's roles dramatically converge.

The scene takes place just after Soelastri has given birth to her first child (126).

*Soedarmo's face beamed; he went busily back and forth, gave instructions, looked at his watch when it was the baby's feeding time and went about looking buoyed up, now and then making serious comments such as when he pointed out to Soelastri that being systematic was the most important thing in a young baby's life. Life centred on the baby, conversations were focused on the baby who was called Roestini and quietly sucked on her small fists and took no notice of the adults around her who acted so foolishly.*

*Marti sent Soelastri ten guilders and some hand-me down clothes from her first born, because Marti had the habit of using old clothes at the birth of a new-born and, if it wasn't absolutely necessary, not to buy anything new. She wrote to Soelastri that at that time of the year she had a lot of expenses and so could not send more than the enclosed. With this money Soelastri got some clothes made; she herself used needle and thread in bed and so the baby's wardrobe grew till it contained a sizeable number of items.*

*Soelastri's father came from Garut on the tenth day [Soelastri's mother had come immediately the child was born. CWW] Mother sat at that moment in the bedroom and had the baby on her arm. She was speaking to the baby and so she didn't know who had come in. When father stood right behind her he said;*

*"Have you been here long, mother?"*

*She looked up surprised; a strange, twitching smile spread over her face and she laid the baby on the bed. Then she asked, like a young girl, timidly:*

*"Where have you come from, father? I didn't know that you were coming."*

*He didn't answer, placed his walking stick in the corner and looked round the room. Soelastri came in and went up to her father, kissed the outstretched hand which he offered as was customary between them and puzzled over the smartness and youthful cut of his clothes. Father took the small hand of the baby, asked her name and then said casually: "Mother I have just got married to Ratna in Garoet," as though it was of no importance.*

*"What? What did you say?" The blood drained from mother's cheeks and lips. Soelastri stood nailed to the ground.*

*'Yes, married to Ratna.' Father took the baby's other small hand. Mother turned slowly away and it disturbed Soelstri to see her like that. A long silence - then mother's flat voice:*

*"Couldn't you find someone else for it?"*

*Father, with a deprecating gesture and his manner self-conscious and stiff, answered abruptly*

*"It makes no difference to me what people think; I am married to Ratna not for myself, but for our child, Marti, to prevent something unfortunate."*

*Mother's eyes were both a question and an entreaty. She murmured defeatedly;*

*"Our child? What do you mean? Why not someone else?"*

*The last came out mechanically as an afterthought; she stood there so pitifully, but bravely, her lovely mother with her self-control. Her whole life she had always been calm at the time of the strongest emotions; she had always kept herself so much in the background that one hardly noticed her and were sometimes surprised that she could also be angry or happy. It was taken for granted that she found everything that father did good, that one did not need to take account of her wishes, nor to bother about her occasional tears. Mother was mother, a weak woman, who only wanted peace in the family. After a long silence father drew her to him.*

*"Come," he said. "I shall explain it to you. But no, Soelastri should also know. Marti's husband wanted to start a relationship with Ratna; for Marti that would have meant the end of her trust and her happiness. It was for that reason that I married Ratna, for your daughter, mother, do you understand? How would Marti have taken it if she had heard that of her husband? The happiness of our child lies in your hands, mother." The man who ordinarily was so well spoken who was able to find the right words on every occasion now hummed and haed. "Is this my father, thought Soelastri, "the father for whom I had so much respect?" She now saw the well-known features in a different light, as proofs of an inner passion and fire where some trace of shame was just visible, as he realised that at one stroke a child's love and respect had changed into an unconscious hate. That moment full of silenced emotion would be a decisive one in Soelastri's life. Mother felt powerless faced with the calmness of her husband.*

*'And how will Ipah take it?' she protested weakly and it was as though the forced smile on her face said more than her words. Ipah was mother's full niece whom father had married after mother, with the explanation that that he had to save her from her frequent nervous attacks.....*

*[Later that evening]*

*Soelastris and Soedarmo sat in the bedroom and heard the sounds of the dull voices, as though the speakers were tired. Soelastris heard; "It is nice that our daughter is now properly housed, don't you think, mother?"*

*"Yes the garden is big. In the morning I always shiver with the cold here." Mother's voice spoke evenly; then, in a very different tone:*

*"I just want to say that Ipah will have a relapse. It won't make any difference to me, after all I already have several children."*

*Father, in an irritated voice:*

*"I have already explained why I did it. If you don't care about our daughter's happiness... don't be so narrow-minded as other women. Ipah must just accept everything. In the end what counts about someone's behaviour is the intention. It is better for people to make fun of me than for Marti to suffer." He said it in a convincing manner, decisively, abruptly, in a strong voice.*

*A silence in which Soedarmo sat listening. Soelastris tried to draw his attention with a joke but saw that he was listening attentively. The voices said nothing more. Each one was in all likelihood sunk in thought, perhaps they were also noticing the poetry in the flitting of the shadows between the sun-flower leaves.*

*Mother's reproachful voice came again;*

*"You only think of yourself, father. What will the children make of it? They will be ashamed. You already have so many grandchildren and you behave like a young man wanting to sow wild oats."*

*Then, critically:*

*"An old man acting as though he was young. Aren't you ashamed?"*

*In response to mother's mocking tone the other voice sounded quietly and calmly:*

*"God's reward to the good is great. You want happiness in the after-life don't you? If so, you must renounce worldly things; come mother you would do well if you were to accept this. Moreover my love for you is different, spiritual, not of the earthly kind."*

*Then both voices were silent; they were probably looking out again at the sunflowers which could say nothing, only vainly preen themselves with their golden faces. Curious Soedarmo asked:*

*"What 's up, Tri?"*

*She shrugged her shoulders and answered indifferently:*

*"Oh family matters, of no importance to us."*

*He was not satisfied with that and looked at her questioningly but averting her face she began to laugh and playfully pulled him outside.*

It is the abrupt change of mood which is so startling to the reader. At one level that effect is perhaps deliberately designed to reproduce the shock which Soelastris herself faces (or, to speak autobiographically, Soewarsih must have faced) when the father's announcement is made. Coming as it does at a time when the family is experiencing great joy at the birth of the new baby it immediately poisons the atmosphere and arouses in Soelastris and her mother feelings of anger, despair and powerlessness. For the reader, however, the surprise is double one. This is the first appearance of the mother and father in the narrative, and there has been no indication up to this point that they will play a significant role. Prior to this episode the reader's attention had been directed towards the milieu of the school, the difficulties with fellow-teachers and the references to the political mood of the times nicely captured in the vignette of a visit to Soekarno's house in Bandung. At the same time because these descriptions were always presented as accounts of Soelastris's personal responses to the situations, in particular in trying to fathom her husband, Soedarmo's, moods and place herself more securely within the new environment which she has entered on her arrival in Bandung, the reader has always been conscious of the tension between the events themselves and the interpretation which Soelastris has put on them and the emotional significance they have for her. These contemplative reflections have, however, always had as their reference what lies outside her, and there has always been a choice for her in whether to engage and negotiate the terms of her involvement. This has been true even of her relationship with her husband from whom at various times in her objectification of their relationship she can, as the recording of her thoughts here indicate, disengage.

With her pregnancy and the birth of Roestini, however, this distancing is no longer possible: she is drawn into a relationship in which she is obliged to take responsibility not only for herself but for another, and she does it very willingly. There has, then, been a perceptible change of thematic direction in the novel, a move away from the documentary history of the earlier scenes to a closer analysis of a feminine consciousness, and a very specific one at that; consequently the expectations of the reader also shift to accommodate this new focus. The reader having been prepared for the novel's new concern to explore the significance of motherhood can in this context happily read the reference to Marti as substantiating detail contributing to the realism of the depiction of the event: childbirth as an occasion is culturally constructed in precisely this way in Indonesian society. Furthermore, the fine detail of the reference to the sending of hand-me-down clothes while again adding to the realism and thus to the credibility of the account also allows further insight into the character of Marti herself: she shows affectionate concern for her sister, but at the same time she is practical and businesslike: no comments about the baby but a reference to the pressing needs of her own daily routines, efficiency tempered by a sense of sororal responsibility but a certain cold lack of emotion. The arrival of Soelastris's

mother is also initially framed by the reader in this way: within that cultural milieu a mother always assists a daughter, and since we understand that the narrative at this point wants us to be drawn into this contemplation of Soelastrī's family life we consequently anticipate the role of the mother and possibly a dialogue between Soelastrī and her which will raise issues of identity and a comparison between the worlds of daughter and mother. Indeed this is what happens but in a way which confounds the reader's expectations. Instead of the experiential difference between mother and daughter being explored through a comparison of attitudes and aspirations, the reader like Soelastrī is forced to examine that difference, not through the mediation of a dialogue in which Soelastrī's new status as mother would remain the principal object of attention, but through confronting a brutal psychological experience which displaces the reader's attention away from Soelastrī altogether and onto the relationship between her mother and father. Because we have no prior knowledge of this relationship the shock of the father's revelation is even more of a surprise to us than it is to Soelastrī, since she at least is familiar with her father's past behaviour.

Consistent with the structure of the novel and its desire to attain autobiographical vraisemblance by deliberately avoiding an impression of teleological constructedness - which would have been the consequence of a cumulatively developing plot - this episode like others in the novel is quickly over and the narration moves on to later events. The subject of the father's marriage is mentioned once later in conversation with Marti, but it is signalled there as only one of the elements which affect Soelastrī's relationship with him, and not so significant as the hostility which he shows to her and her husband because they have not established themselves in respectable careers as Marti and her husband have done. After this one appearance, Soelastrī's mother disappears from the reader's view altogether.

How then does the shock of the confrontation work to extend the reader's understanding? The answer is that it compels us to contextualise Soelastrī's position completely afresh; our understanding of not only the range of her experiences but also of the nature of her self-perceptions and the construction of the two narratives, hers and the author, Soewarsih's, need to be revised. We now know significantly more about "where she is coming from". The extent of our revision will, however, depend equally on where the reader herself is coming from. (This observation seems to me to have very far-reaching implications for how we read, or rather what skills we need to bring to the reading of, postcolonial literature. This is not the place to address that issue, but my impression is that most of us need far more contextual knowledge of history and culture than we currently employ in our readings. That is not to say that we cannot enjoy this literature or bring our own insights to it from a comparative perspective, but it is to state that if we claim to make authoritative remarks on how such literature should be interpreted, then like all scholars, whatever their discipline, we must ensure that we know and know well the relevant contexts, intertextual, cultural

and historical, in which the writing is embedded.) To the ideal reader, Du Perron perhaps, or one of Soewarsih's Dutch educated peers, the disclosures about Soelastris's parents, although evoking a feeling of repugnance towards the father and sympathy with the mother, would have been within their range of understanding. This sort of ordering of marital affairs was common enough - and indeed can still be found in Indonesia today. Furthermore, it is exactly an instance of that kind of practice which so preoccupied the women's movement in its campaigning at the time, and the evidence of it here goes a long way to explaining why it was these issues and not others which were the cause around which women rallied. Similar humiliating circumstances forty years earlier had also prompted Kartini's outbursts against the injustice of the system. That it can happen within the families of the social background of Soelastris and her sister shows that no one is immune. The reader now possesses information critical to a fuller understanding of Soelastris and permitting a more fine-grained assessment of her actions and thoughts. It is not that the spectre of her mother haunts Soelastris but rather that the immediate experience of her family shapes her attitude to her engagement with the world. And consequently it also shapes the way she chooses to write about significant experience.

The organisation of schools, the running of journals, the setting up of meetings and study groups, these Soelastris leaves to others, in particular to Soedarmo and Marti; what concerns her is the developing relationships between family and friends with all the ups and downs that this on-going process entails. Thus, whereas Soedarmo's purchase on the reality of the everyday world is maintained through active public engagement, striving to reach out to others, Soelastris seeks her own sense of self in their circle of family and friends. For her, although she shares the values and opinions of those close to her, political ambitions and commitments are ancillary and her novel will demonstrate that. The portrait of her mother is not, then, intended to be emblematic; it is not a reference point through which the reader is being asked to imagine a generic social condition, as it would have been perhaps in the hands of other tendentious writers of the period. The conventions of the autobiographical novel in fact prevent that happening, since being autobiographical it is dependent on the reader's willingness to accept that the characters and events of the novel are unique, individual and idiosyncratic and cannot be read off as representative, at least not in any easy sense of the word.

What this episode does, then, is to make more transparent the strategy of the novel, the logic of its structure. Soelastris who continues throughout to be the focus of the reader's attention is seen by the reader in this short episode as mother, sister, daughter, wife and, taking all these together, as a woman. In the representation of each of these roles the reader is exposed briefly but tellingly to the constituents of Soelastris's life-world. Even the short description of how she tries to keep her husband away from the knowledge of her parents' affairs is, to anyone who knows the context of family life in Indonesia, deeply revealing

in its close correspondence to everyday reality. Soelastri is understandably embarrassed by her father's behaviour, and Soedarmo is intensely curious about what is happening, because this will have long-term implications for Soedarmo's attitude to her family, his moral evaluation of them; and, as Soelastri knows, this in turn will have implications for their marriage and their own relationship. Marriages in that cultural context and for all strata within the society are centrally and ineluctably matters for the wider families of both spouses, and the ideal reader knows very precisely what Soelastri is up to and the thoughts which are running through her head.

A careful reading of this episode alerts us, then, to what might be an appropriate synoptic view of the novel. It is autobiographical, but autobiographical in a special way. When, as is usually the case, it is read through a post-Independence lens, as a straightforward account of the history of the times as experienced by the Dutch-educated nationalist inspired elite, it can provide a rewarding and useful corrective to those interpretations of the period which are over-dependent on a political history perspective with its emphasis on momentous events and significant individuals. However, confining oneself to such an approach seems to me to ignore the structural logic of the novel. The politics of the time certainly loom large as the context in which the events of the novel take place, and we cannot understand the actions of the individuals unless we know something of the political atmosphere of the time and of the frustrated aspirations of Indonesian nationalists. Nevertheless, the colonial politics of the period is only the context. The novel's principal focus lies elsewhere: in the depiction of how intimate personal relationships evolve and change under the strain of social and political pressures. Beyond that, but perhaps even prior to it in terms of its significance to the writer and potentially to the reader, is the novel's demonstration that it is only through this form of reflexive writing, grounded in this case in a self-consciously gendered vision du monde, that in fact the nature of the experience can be fully realised. With the passage of time and the increase in cultural distance from the Java of the 1930s it is increasingly difficult for contemporary readers to grasp fully these two dimensions of *Buiten het Gareel*. Post-colonial novels inevitably present problems of interpretation to readers from the metropole; in the case of autobiographical post-colonial novels these problems may sometimes appear insuperable, but recognising this brings its own rewards.

#### REFERENCES

- Dolk, Liesbeth. 1993. *Twee Zielen, Twee Gedachten. Tijdschriften en Intellectuelen op Java (1900-1957)*. Leiden: KITLV Uitgeverij.
- Kartini, Raden Adjeng. 1911. *Door Duisternis tot Licht, Gedachten van Raden djeng Kartini, Semarang, Soerabaja*. 's-Gravenhage: G.C.T. Van Dorp.
- Kerdijk, Rosa M.T. 2002. *Wayang-liederen. Biografi Politik Budaya Noto Soeroto*. (Afterword by Madelon Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis: 117-182. Jakarta: Munitas Bambu).

- Snoek, Kees. 1990. *De Indische Jaren van E. Du Perron*. Amsterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmaar.
- Soewarsih Djojopoespito. 1941. *Buiten het Gareel*. Utrecht: W. de Haan
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. *Manusia Bebas*, (translation of *Buiten het Gareel*). Jakarta: Djambatan.
- Termorshuizen, Gerard. 1986. Nawoord: 219-229. IN Soewarsih Djojopoespito, *Buiten het Gareel*. 's-Gravenhage: Nijgh & Van Ditmar.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. De Vrijheid is en wordt duur betaald. Soewarsih Djojopoespito's leven buiten het gareel": 1-22. IN *Tussen Twee Werelden. Het Gevoel van Ontheemding in De Postkoloniale Literatuur*, edited by Theo D'Haen en Peter Liebrechts. *Semaian 21*.
- Watson, C. W. 2000. *Of Self and Nation. Autobiography and the Representation of Modern Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

C. W. Watson, Ph.D  
Dept. of Anthropology,  
University of Kent,  
Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NR  
England  
E-mail: C.W.Watson@kent.ac.uk