

## Indonesian Pre-War Chinese Peranakan Writings as Indonesian ‘Post-colonial’ Literary Texts

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### ABSTRAK

*Pertikaian Gayatri Spivak tentang kebolehan seorang subaltern yang dibelenggu oleh penindasan kuasa-kuasa kolonial, telah menganjak paradigma fokus analisis kritikal pascakolonial daripada kesusasteraan yang diterbitkan selepas kolonialisme kepada kesusasteraan yang muncul sebelum dan semasa zaman penjajah kolonial dalam bahasa selain daripada bahasa penjajah. Makalah ini bertujuan membuktikan bahawa fenomena pascakolonial bermula pada saat pertemuan antara pihak penjajah kolonial dengan yang dijajahi. Pengisian dan tujahan dalam penulisan sebelum perang orang Cina Indonesia dari tahun 1897-1942 yang berjumlah lebih daripada 3,000 merupakan bukti bahawa teks ‘pasca’ kolonial muncul menjelang kesedaran kemerdekaan dan bukan selepas kemerdekaan seperti yang diutarakan oleh Homi K. Bhabha semasa perbincangannya tentang masa ‘mimicry’ dalam sastera pascakolonial. Suatu analisis penulisan novel fiksiyen golongan Tionghoa peranakan akan mendedahkan unsur wacana pascakolonial seperti kehadiran suatu masa ‘kepalsuan’, suatu ikhtiar mencari kebebasan, keinginan untuk satu identiti nasional yang hibrid dan pendirian antikolonial dalam suatu bahasa hibrid semasa penjajahan kolonial Belanda di Hindia Timur.*

*Kata kunci: Pascakolonial, Indonesia, sebelum perang, novel, Tionghoa peranakan*

### ABSTRACT

*Gayatri Spivak’s dispute about the abilities of the silenced subaltern in colonial hegemonies has contributed to a possible paradigm shift in the focus of postcolonial critical analysis from literature published after colonialism to an awareness of literature by the natives during and before colonialism albeit in another language. This article aims to prove that a ‘post’ colonial phenomenon begins at the moment of encounter between the colonial and subject as evidenced in the pre-war Chinese Indonesian writings from 1897-1942. The content and intent of some 3,000 over copies raised pertinent evidence to the existence of ‘post’ colonial texts appearing at the dawn of national consciousness rather than post-independence as suggested by Homi K. Bhabha*

*when discoursing a period of mimicry in postcolonial literature. An analysis of pre-war Tionghoa peranakan fiction novels will uncover elements of 'post' colonial discourse, which includes a period of 'in-authenticity', a search for freedom, a national hybrid identity and an anti-colonial stand in a language of their own during Dutch colonialism in the East Indies.*

*Keywords: Postcolonial, Indonesia, pre-war, novels, Tionghoa Peranakan*

## INTRODUCTION

Largely due to the efforts of a number of Indonesian literature specialists namely, Salmon Claudine, Leo Suryadinata, Jakob Sumardjo and Myra Sidharta, the 3,005 written works that include 73 scripts, 183 *syair*(s), 233 Western translations, 759 Chinese translations and 1398 novels (Salmon 1981: xv) and short stories have not been ignored or abandoned by Indonesian literary history. United by the need to acknowledge this vast quantity of works that have been marginalized by mainstream Indonesian literature, these scholars defied mainstream perceptions of *Tionghoa peranakan* literature as 'kesusasteraan liar' or 'wild literature', to force the recognition of such a large quantity of written works as the precursors of modern Indonesian literature. In this article the terms 'Tionghoa peranakan' is used to refer to the Chinese in Indonesia in deference to their aversion to the term 'Cina' or Chinese.

These works written in what historians refer to as low Malay, have not been valued as a national heritage, which it rightly deserves. Writers like Pramoedya Ananta Toer, identified the language as a mixture of Malay, a Chinese dialect *Hokkien* and a smattering of Dutch as 'Bahasa kerja' or 'Working language' (1962). Atmakusumah Astraatmdja (2000: 32-33) generously appealed to universality in the treatment of languages now extinct in response to criticism leveled on 'low Malay' which will be referred to as *bahasa Melajoe tionghoa* as described by Sutan Takdir Alisjahsabaya (1962: 125). Despite these heroic gestures, these works have not generated enough academic interest partly because of the misconception of its inferiority but mostly because of its hybridity. This concept of inferiority was instilled by the Dutch colonial in the hope that the prolific *Tionghoa peranakan*s would stop perpetrating anticolonial propaganda through a decree that proclaimed that *bahasa Melajoe tionghoa* used by the *Tionghoa peranakan* writers were of low quality and therefore, unfit to be called literature.

Ania Loomba (1998: 174) recognizes the embrace of a hybrid identity as a 'strategy' to simultaneously ensure survival and retaliation against established cultural ideas, truth and institutions that reject cultural 'in-authenticity' in relation to identity. Cultural 'in-authenticity' (Loomba 1998: 177) refers to a perception of one's own impure identity, which has been invaded by hybridity. For example as

opposed to the *totoks*, the *Tionghoa peranakans* are the second generation Chinese born in the East Indies and through marriage have acculturated or assimilated with locals or cultural proximity with the *pribumis*. The *Tionghoa peranakans* distinguished themselves from the *totoks* through their language called 'low Malay' which, as mentioned earlier is a mixture of Malay, Dutch and Chinese. They also practiced a culture that is a mixture of both Chinese and Malay or a local ethnic culture and the *Tionghoa peranakan* woman can be identified through the *kebaya*, an ethnic Malay blouse and long *sarong* which reflects the *pribumi* influence in their lives.

Their hybrid identity leaves them on the margins of existence in the East Indies as they were usually lumped together with the Chinese in legality but were socially unacceptable to the Chinese *totoks* as well. In the midst of colonial Dutch imperialism, the *Tionghoa peranakans* qualified as subalterns thrice removed. They were not only on the margins of the East Indies' colony as subjects of the Dutch colonial but were also foreign to the subjugated *pribumis* and simultaneously hybrid outcasts among the Chinese *totoks* as well.

In the process of claiming a 'post' colonial identity for the works written by the *Tionghoa peranakan*, this article also intends to show that the hybrid identity itself ceased to be merely a means of survival for them. The commas that bracket 'post' are allusions to the fact that postcolonial[ity] does not necessary happen *after* colonialism, but at the moment of contact between the colonial and its subject. The hybrid elements found in the written works compounded by the *Tionghoa peranakan* writers' diaspor[ic] background place them in the 'indeterminate zone, or 'place of hybridity', where anti-colonial politics first begins to articulate its agenda' (Bhabha 1994: 25 qtd. by Ghandi 1998: 131).

The works became a written form of retaliation against hegemonic powers that prevailed and a defiance of the ruling Dutch administration, the ancestral past and a native interpretation of themselves. Their hybrid identity manifested in their writings also enabled them to challenge, relate, interpret and perceive 'truth' independently marking their freedom from hegemonic powers. *Tionghoa peranakan* novels with original themes were not truly Malay classics evidenced in the hybrid language used and the themes of being torn between the choice of returning to China or staying in the East Indies, moral decadence, the cruelty of Chinese traditions and tragic posterity in the early years from 1897-1910. Neither were they colonial, even though they were written during the colonial period of Indonesia, from 1897-1965. It also defied a nationalistic definition when compared to *pribumi* writings that prevailed after or before the 1900s. This article is focused on mining a number of novels first published in serial form in local dailies and then compiled into novels such as *Penghidoepan*, and *Tjerita Roman* during the pre-war period from between 1897 and 1942. The novels and novellas revolved around tragic romance plots that implied the themes mentioned above. Spanning a breath of 60-70 years, the emergence of these written works predate the rise of modern Indonesian novels, with the publication of the first novel *Oeij-Se*

(Thio Tjien Boen 1903) followed by *Lo Fen Koei* (Gouw Peng Liang 1903) and *Njai Alimah* (Oei Soei Tiong 1904) with original plots and thematic concerns.

Among the 806 (Claudine Salmon 1981: xv) *Tionghoa peranakan* writers and the unfortunate condescending prejudice against the romance genre because of its light themes, this article explores the implications of 'post' colonial sites or 'traits' that identify these written texts as postcolonial in content and intent. The 'post' colonial sites that has emerged with the hybrid existence of the *Tionghoa peranakans* on the margins of coloniality is documented in the awareness of 'in-authenticity' demonstrated by the various authors' vacillation between embracing China or the East Indies as their mother land. The changes in the treatment of the female persona or non-persona through the different time periods also serves as an indication of a postcolonial search for freedom from the colonial allegorized in the voiceless, often violated female heroine. At the dawn of independence, the anti-colonial messages were more overt with criticism and rejection leveled against the Dutch male character in the novels. These 'sites' are congruent with postcolonial writings of 'marginality discourse' (Ghandi 1998: 56) favoured by Michel Foucault and Gayatri Spivak in their quest to decenter the hegemonies imposed by male-colonial-European epistemology meticulously mapped out by Edward Said in his ur-book entitled *Orientalism* (2003[1978]). These written works had the pre-requi sites of postcolonial literature as they gave expression to colonial experience by overturning the stereotypes of subalternism, interrogating their past and demystifying the power of the Dutch administration leading to a search for freedom in the form of nationalist writing (Boehmer1995: 3).

#### POSTCOLONIAL 'INAUTHENTICITY' UNCOVERED

The first element of postcolonial[ity] that is made obvious to the reader of the *Tionghoa peranakan* novels is warring between writer's who were pro-China and pro-East Indies. Those who were pro-China referred to China as a safe haven during difficult times while those who were reluctant to perceive China in this respect viewed East Indies as their motherland. The writers would project their inner warrings through the disparate relationships between the older and younger generations. Although they were didactic in style, the *Tionghoa peranakans* began writing translations before embarking on the tragic romance genre. These works predictably see the heroes and heroines falling in love against their parents' wishes and subsequently dying tragically for actions that are translated to mean a defiance of traditions or ethics of a conservative Chinese culture. The deliberate act of pitting the different generations against one another was either to deter or encourage anarchy according to the bent of the authors. The plots varied as little as possible, to compound the teachings and to discourage the readers from seeking their own counsel in matters pertaining to

marriage. Marriage being an institution that was treated with grave seriousness because of its link to the genealogy of the Chinese came to be viewed as a personification of the importance of the past in these novels.

This retrospective gaze in postcolonial terms is a precept for the rise of feelings of in-authenticity. Most of the reading materials were translated from Chinese text and classics such as *Yuli baobao quanshi wen* by Koa Tek Ie (1878) and religious books like *Boen Tsiang Ti Koen* (1881) (Claudine 1984(a): 19) that proved the *Tionghoa peranakans* were still caught in a retrospective mindset despite five centuries (Purcell 1955: 449) since the first landing of the Chinese in Java. However, Leo Suryadinata (1978: 64) observed that:

... As early as the turn of the twentieth century the Chinese began consciously to think of themselves [still] as part of the Chinese nation (Bangsa Tionghoa), indicating that they saw themselves as different from both the Dutch, and the indigenous population...

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no doubt that like the Chinese *totoks*, the *Tionghoa peranakans* were focused on their motherland rather than their adopted land, the East Indies. Like any diaspo[ric] people they reacted by drawing inwards, relating and uncovering their past in their present manifested in the cultural practices and incessant religious reminders. Although the nostalgia was strong, they were encouraged to retrospection by hostile treatment by the Dutch imperialist eager to protect the indigenous economic interests in lieu of their own. The Chinese migrant was deliberately marginalized and isolated by the residential zoning system introduced in 1863 called *passenstelsel* and *wijkenstelsel* (Somers 1964: 1-2) (Williams 1964: 28-29), which quarantined the Chinese in specific areas and only allowed them to leave the area after obtaining a pass. The Dutch prevented the intermingling of the races to ensure the continual governance through the strategy of 'divide and rule'. However, this did not prevent assimilation as Dutch policies relaxed and changed in the face of threats from China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the emergence of the ethical policy in 1870. The assimilation of colonial and indigenous cultures is reflected in the *Tionghoa peranakan* literature beginning in 1903, making its postcolonial possibilities impossible to ignore. Foulcher (1995: 157) in contemplating African nativist literature himself identified this aspect as part and parcel of post-colonial[ity]. He observed that:

... The assimilation of non-indigenous cultures, as a product of the colonial experience, came to be seen as an aspect of the reality of the postcolonial condition...

The *Tionghoa peranakan* literature at the initial years after migration reflected a need to create their own stories which disseminated the moral and communicative structures not to replace the past as was expected, but merely to mime it. Perhaps the instability and confusion associated with the beginnings had contributed to the small amount of works published that was not translated works. Didactic tales like *Nyai Alimah* (Oei Soei Tiong 1904), *Oey Se* (Thio Tjien Boen 1903), *Pembalesan jang dikedji* (Lie Kim Hok 1912) and *Lo Fen Koei*

(Gouw Peng Liang 1907) as well as *Sie Po Giok* (Tio Ie Soei 1903) appeared to be vehicles of a Confucious revival which indeed happened at the dawn of the twentieth century in tandem with the setting up of the Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan (THHK)(Nio Joe Lan 1940: 1-5). In embracing Confucianism, they hung onto the past manifested in cultural and religious adherences in their bid to forge closer ties to their motherland and thus their Chinese identity. In the 1880's, traditional Chinese schools (Suryadinata 1978: 4) flourished as the only schools that were available to the Chinese, which included the *Tionghoa peranakans* who were more attracted to the Dutch national schools rather than the THHK (Leo Suryadinata 1978: 5-9). Nevertheless, the enthusiasm of the *Tionghoa peranakans* in the setting up of THHK schools with its 'revivalist' features served more as an indication of a step backward for these far removed cousins of the first immigrants. If postcolonial paradigms predictably move from 'in-authenticity' to nativism and then to a distrust of homogenizing notions of nationhood as a backdrop for universal hybridity, then these works testify to a nativist assertion of postcoloniality. Reeling from feelings of 'in-authenticity' which caused a retrospective gaze the *Tionghoa peranakans* experienced attempts to revive the Chinese identity through the social cultural initiatives like the raising of Chinese schools and publishing translations of Confucius' texts as part of their transcendence to 'nativism'.

#### IN PURSUIT OF FREEDOM – FEMINISM

In the works written from 1920s onwards, which is duly noted as the golden era of the *Tionghoa peranakan* literature, changes in traditional cultural practices such as marriage and the perception of a women's position in society were advocated through the subtle thematic and stylistic changes from tragic romances to true 'happily-ever-after' romance. In most of the novels before 1920, the women characters appear as servile, subservient and marginal to the male characters. The novels may carry the names of the heroine on their title covers but the reference to the heroine and the voiceless-ness of the female characters like Nona Lo Lan Nio in *Pembalesan Allah jang Adil* (Author unkown 1920) is ironic. The irony is better understood when one considers that the majority of the writers of before 1920s are male which entailed stories that have been told from the male perspective. According to Salmon (1984: 15) research on the number of women writers and their endeavors, only 30 out of 800 authors and translators were women. Nevertheless, there were a small number of female writers like Dahlia whose real name was Tan Lip Nio and who wrote novels from the female point of view to counter the imbalance. Dahlia's *Kasopanan Timoer* was published in 1912 and not after 1925 as claimed by Salmon (1984: 152) of the earliest emancipatory writings by *Tionghoa peranakan* women. Dahlia's writings exposed a determination by the female writers who tried to organize themselves

in order to improve their social status and use their literary talents to express their resistance to the male orientated social order of their conservative society.

In the preface of the novel *Kasopanan Timoer* (Dahlia 1912), it is written that the objective of the novel is to show that Eastern values are not stagnant like their Western counterparts but change according to the times. This is especially true of positive changes in the social behaviour exhibited by the characters in her novels (Dahlia 1927: preface). In *Kasopanan Timoer* (1927), Dahlia encourages women to secure a full education and pursue a career if necessary and possible. The main character Kiok Nio bemoans her feminine self. Her frustrations stem from her identity as a woman trapped in the traditional mindset of her society. When she is faced with a desperate situation where her mother is too old to continue making and selling ‘*kueh*’ (a sweet flour-based dessert), Kiok Nio is heard saying these words:

... Ach kaloe akoe djadi satoe anak lelaki, dengan pladjarankoe jang boleh dibilang tjokoep, tentoe akoe biasa bikin iboe tida oesah rasaken itoe kasengsarahan, ia berkata sendirian... (Dahlia 1927: 65) (Ah! If I were a man, with my education which is deemed enough, definitely I would be able to prevent my mother from suffering, says Kiok Nio to herself.)

It is evident that Dahlia has created a female character, who challenges the traditional roles and perceptions of the *Tionghoa peranakan* woman.

It is interesting to note the authorial intrusion that surfaces in the novel especially when certain parts of the dialogues do not appear to have been spoken by any character in the novels. This is especially true in reference to the condescension towards *Tionghoa peranakan* women who work. These words were not attributed to the heroine Kiok Nio but stood on its own, presumably the author’s voice:

... *Ini semoea gara-garanya bangsa kita jang anggep, kaloe satoe gadis brani melangkah roemah boeat bekerdja di kantooran, tida berbeda djoga seperti djadi satoe boenga rajah didjalanan...* (Dahlia 1927: 9). (These are all assumptions made by our nation, if a young woman dares to venture out of the house to work in a factory, she is no different from a common hibiscus flower on the roadside).

However, Dahlia is determined to prove, through her character that women who are educated and work outside of the house are not necessarily promiscuous or neglectful of their Eastern values that include purity, faithfulness and honesty. Dahlia proclaims this of Kiok Nio when she describes her as “*Ini Nona Tionghoa jang maski bagimana modern, dan publik anggep terlaloe gila kababatan, toch liangsimnja masih sedar, masih kargaken kasopanan Timoer.*” (Dahlia 1927: 64) (This Chinese peranakan lady, although very modern and open could be mistaken to be mad about Western values, but she still possesses discernment within her that values Eastern morals and values.)

Kiok Nio, Dahlia’s heroine in *Kasopanan Timoer* (1927) also shuns the conservative beliefs in superstition such as the belief in *alamat djelek* or omens

(Dahlia 1927: 44). Unlike the other heroines like Giok Ngo in *Nona Giok Ngo* (Hiang San Djin 1919), Nona Tjoe-Tjoe in *Nona Tjoe-Tjoe* (Tio Ie Sioe 1922), Nona Lo Lan Nio in *Nona Lo Lan Nio* (author unknown 1920) and Hing Nio in *Dr. Lie...* (Madonna 1912), Kiok Nio is not a victim of circumstances and neither is she the tragic sacrificial heroine. She chooses her own husband-to-be Keon San because he admires her independence and respects it. In a meeting between them he says:

*...akoe merasa kagoem sama satoe prempoen jang poenjaken angen-angen boet self-standing (berdiri sendiri) kerna ini ada mengoendjoek bahoea ia soeda mendoesin pada harganja kahormatan diri sendiri...* (Dahlia 1927: 40) (.I admire a woman who aspires to be independent because it shows that she has found her own self- respect).

From the beginning of the novel Kiok Nio appears to be in control of her destiny as is seen in her decision to allow Keon San to court her by replying to his note. Her beauty and the manner in which she carries herself even attract her Dutch boss' attention. She gets the courage to reject her boss' offer of marriage with the excuse that their Eastern and Western upbringing will not suit. *...Timoer dengen Timoer, Barat dengen barat, toean Jansen...* she says. (Dahlia 1927: 51). With Kiok Nio eventually selecting to marry Keon San rather than her boss, Dahlia has indirectly indicated that a woman should not only select her own spouse but choose a man who has respect for her as an equal. These are not acceptable tenets to the Chinese traditions that assume the marriage institution as the prerogative of the parents of both the bride and bridegroom. Dahlia goes on to highlight the plight of the *Tionghoa peranakan* women when she makes Keon San, the hero say these words:

*... Sabetoelnja boeat satoe gadis tionghoa djarang ada jang poenjaken angen-angen begitoe tinggi, kerna kebanyakan marika lebih soeka pendem kapinterannja dalem dapoer, atawa kebanyakan lebi oetamakan kaperlentean dan keplesiran!...* (Dahlia 1927: 40) (Usually a Chinese lady seldom has such high aspirations because a lot of them would prefer to hide their intelligence behind the kitchen or place emphasis on pleasure and indulgence).

Obviously, Dahlia's romance novel is not only the earliest of feminist novels written but appears to be on a crusade to change the perception toward all Chinese women in a male dominated society by introducing her/story told from her perspective.

Dahlia's attempt can be interpreted as an act of validating the individual identity of the *Tionghoa peranakan* woman, which begins by affirming her social and sexual identity. In writing from a female point of view, Dahlia has allowed the sphere of women to interact with that of a man to the extent that the feminine sphere appears the more superior. With such an infraction, Dahlia has entangled herself with the dictates of a patriarchy deeply entrenched in the history of Chinese culture which is the legacy of the Chinese migrants. The old traditions dictate that women should be quiet, unassuming, suffering, silent and



most of all obey their elders or husbands without question, as all the heroines of the novels appear to do. As such, the figure of the Chinese woman standing on the margins, silently in despair becomes a trope of constant discourse between the traditionalist who would preserve patriarchy as a form of protest against the rapid erosion caused by external factors such as colonialism. She is also the postcolonial individual, who feels that change is an inevitable part of the terrain of the *Tionghoa peranakan* identity. Ania Loomba's observation of postcolonial writings is exactly what has been detailed in the *Tionghoa peranakan* novels. She observes:

... If the strengthening of patriarchy within the family became one way for colonized men to assert their otherwise eroded power, women's writings often testify to confusion and pain that accompanied these enormous changes... (Loomba 1998: 220).

The pursuit for emancipation that can be traced through the treatment of the heroine intra-textually reveals a keen awareness of the changing times and implies the search for freedom from the Dutch by the *Tionghoa peranakans*. The woman is, after all ... the image of the Nation-as-Mother... (Loomba 1998: 214) and frequently used as the personification of a woman, which is not new to the natives of East Indies who holds Ibu Kartini as the essence of the Indonesian identity (Gouda 1995: 83). The personification is further compounded by the use of family as a metaphor for the nation (MacClintock 1995: 357 qtd. by Loomba 1998: 217). In rejecting the traditional perceptions of women, the author's through their heroines are implying a rejection of the colonial hegemony personified by patriarchy that has always been associated with Dutch rule (Wessling 1997: 53). The works that were published nearer to the dawn of independence contained more overt expressions of anti-colonialism.

#### ANTI-COLONIAL SENTIMENTS

Kok Nio, Dahlia's heroine in *Kasopanan Timoer's* (1927) rejection of her Dutch boss is an example of overt expressions of anti-colonial inflections that were only hinted at in *Tionghoa peranakan* literature at the beginning. The criticism leveled at the Dutch administration is projected through the Dutch character or non-character in the novels. In placing the iconic submissive woman on a symbolic discourse of colonial relations, through their relationship with Dutch men, the *Tionghoa peranakan* writers have succeeded in ridiculing and disempowering the Dutch colonial. The subaltern is identified as the *Tionghoa peranakan* and the indigenous woman is the agent of anti-colonial sentiments. Frances Gouda (1995: 117), concluded that:

... the collusion between the Dutch romance with 'authentic' Oriental traditions and upper-caste attitudes toward either peasant women or evicted *njai* and their Indo daughters proceeded to banish female subalterns and their children to an inscrutable territory...

As a result, these voiceless women appeared to live on the other side of an enormous social divide, a subaltern who can be inscribed with various forms of otherness.

In retaliation, the *Tionghoa peranakan* writers created an agent of anti-colonialism in the Indonesian women characters of their novels. Symbolically the Indonesian woman character retaliated against their shoddy treatment by Dutch administrators sent to the East Indies as a reminder that the East Indies are not to be taken lightly or treated without honour like the *njai(s)* who are cast aside when they cease to amuse their white masters. *Maninten* by Ngadiloewih (1918) is a prime example of the subtle warning to the Dutch of possible retaliation from the colonized subject. Written in a satirical fashion, Ngadiloewih played on the disproportionate fears of the Dutch women or *memsahibs* (colonial matrons) who were afraid that they would lose their husbands to the exotic charms of the indigenous woman. Maurits Dedemsvaart, a typical young Dutch man whose father sends him to the sugar farms in East Indies to make something of himself predictably takes on a *njai* in the form of Maninten who has ambitions of becoming his wife. However, her secure existence as a *njai* is suddenly shattered with the arrival of a young Dutch maiden, Albertine Brandwijk. Maninten proceeds to poison her lover until he is incoherent and exacts the respect she feels she deserves through marriage. Although Maninten is defeated at the end with the discovery of her treachery, and Maurits falls into the arms of his Dutch love, Maninten's courage in defying the Dutch and their irresponsible ways is more admirable than the docile and silent Albertine. Her vengeance is sweet against a historical backdrop of illtreatment of indigenous women in the hands of their white mistresses. Frances Gouda (1995: 7) reports that:

... indigenous women tended to shoulder the triple burden of native patriarchal practices, European colonial mastery, and the dubious treatment by Indies *njonjas* or British *memsahibs*...

But even at the hands of the Dutch men, the indigenous women were merely silent vessels for sexual needs as is depicted in *Njai Aisah* (1915) who is ruthlessly taken from her husband and child and used to satisfy the lusts of a band of Dutch thieves who then turned her into a maid or decoy for their wicked schemes.

In *Njai Alimah* by Oei Soei Tiong (1904), a tale about the love affair between a poor local girl in Kedoeng Pelloek and Lort, the *onderneming* or rector of the district; the impotence and feebleness of Lort is glaring. Having begun the novel with a sheer glossing of Njai Alimah's character that is likened to an angel:

...seperti djoega satoe bidadari jang dating dari Kaijangan, moekanja boender dan manis, bermesem mesem agaknja, matanja seperti mata boeroeng merak jang lagi berhinggap, toemboeh alisnja laksana titik dawat jang terloekis gambar... (Oei Soei Tiong 1904: 4-5)

(Like an angel from heaven with her sweet pale face, smiling with peacock eyes perched on a canvass like a painting come alive), a reader is left to ponder on the possible satirical style of the novel. The hyperboles that illuminated the descriptions of both Alimah and Lort left the impression that the whole tale was written in an epic satirical fashion not unlike Pope's 17<sup>th</sup> century English epic. This suspicion is further justified by the continued absences of the Dutch 'hero' Lort, whose 'honourable' inclinations led him to await his parents' approval before making her his wife. Alimah who is viciously courted by Kasdrim, the local headman's son is subjected to near death defying experiences in her efforts to thwart the evil spell cast by Kasdrim and a trader, Prijaji Midie who kidnaps her to Banjoemas. Throughout all the trials that the brave heroine undergoes covering 319 pages, Alimah significantly experiences it alone. She escapes from Kasdrim through his own carelessness and manages to escape from Prijaji Midie's boat carrying her to Banjoemas by her own wits. She is also responsible for the apprehension of one Wiromenggolo, the local head mafia in Poegeran who was causing grief to her lover, Lort. The lengthy 18 stanzas of verse in praise of her virtues, which breaks into the narrative three quarters into the tale, is not only a brief respite or a bridge from the other tales within the tale. The stanzas confirm the speculation of Njai Alimah being the personification of Indonesia.

This is further compounded by the treatment of Lort, the only Dutch character in the novel. Lort's character is confirmed as the personification of the imperialist Dutch when we first meet him carrying his gun atop his white horse appropriately hunting wild birds in the forest before he meets and falls for Alimah, incidentally the maid with the bird's eyes. The analogy between Alimah and Indonesia and Lort to the Dutch colonial cannot be ignored. Lort appears to make love to her but each time he seeks Alimah out in her rotting home, he ends by giving her money after trading kisses and hugs with her (Oei Soei Tiong 1904: 20, 25, 30). Oei Soei Tiong the writer obviously set out to write more than just a romantic tale. From his treatment of the characters in his tale, it appears that Oei was not averse to criticizing the Dutch and their governance of the Indies as well as their treatment of the people. Alimah does not run to him when Kasdrim threatens to rape her in a party where Lort is the officiating guest of honour. When she does go to him after narrowly escaping from Prijaji Midie, instead of embracing her in relief, he questions her faithfulness to him (Oei Soei Tiong 1904: 127). Oei is careful to feed the image of the imperialist in the Lort character, not only through his name, but through the image of him always appearing before Njai Alimah from atop his white horse reaching out to gift her with silver (Oei Soei Tiong 1904: 20, 30). The analogies and the conspicuous absences of Lort emphasize the role of the literature as a tool of anti-colonial expressions.

The act of disassociating the Dutch character from the lives of the Indies characters in the novels is also a deliberate attempt to marginalize the Dutch colonial in order to decenter the colonial power and emphasize their impotence. The cold detachment of the colonial is affirmed both by Frances Gouda, the

author of *Dutch Culture Overseas: Colonial Practice in the Netherlands Indies, 1900-1942* who observed that the Dutch had successfully ... hid behind a 'curtain of impenetrable whiteness'. [They had according to Gouda,] collectively ... erected a bulwark of ideological certainty about their 'European' racial and cultural superiority over indigenous subjects. Grounded in masculine patriotism and a cult of the superior rationality of Europeans, this 'white' homogeneity supposedly transcended all class differences... (Gouda 1995: 164). Wessling's *Imperialism and Colonialism essays on the History of European Expansion* supports Gouda's observations: He says, ... Colonial rule was, moreover, to a certain extent a continuation of existing forms of indirect or informal control... (Wessling 1997: 10).

The tale between Alimah and Lort which is the backbone of Oei's narrative is significantly isolated from the rest of the tales bridged by Alimah, who is much sought after for her beauty and virtues. Lord is deliberately left out of the action concerning the woman he loves, especially when Kasdrim seeks out the local bomoh to cast a spell on Alimah because he does not belong to the circle that is inhabited by Prijaji Midie (representing the Priyayi's). This includes the plot to kidnap her hatched out by Mak Saidah and her son Kong Tjin Hong (the Tionghoa peranakans) for Enjek Amat (the pribumi), the jeweller from Bogor. The imperialist is the outsider who is not to be trusted and cannot be relied upon. Each character appears to be a personification of a particular majority race or nationality in Dutch ruled Indies at that point of time.

Through the personification of the heroine it is suggested that Indonesia plays a more benevolent role than the colonizer. Alimah is the more superior between the lovers in terms of virtue and wits. She single-handedly lured the dangerous Wiromenggolo into displaying the jewels he had stolen from Enjek Amat leading him to be arrested by the authorities namely, Lort. Aside from that, Alimah disregards the dishonour to her name when she agrees to be his 'Njai' (*Njai Alimah* 1904: 102), a kept mistress, rather than the respected mistress of the house by marriage. The differences between a mistress of the house and a kept woman is emphasized when the servant responds to the request of meeting with the mistress of the house only to be told, there is no 'Nyonya' (mistress) of the house but there is a 'Njai besar' (kept woman). She is able to adapt to the Dutch ways; learning the language and ways to prepare Dutch meals in a mere 3 months (*Njai Alimah* 1904: 168-169). Not once is there an indication that Lort learnt her ways nor did he lament the fact that he should have caught the scoundrel Wiromenggolo himself seeing that he was after all the administrator at that time. His 'honourable' intentions that prevented him from initially offering to make Alimah his wife rather than a mistress, fizzles out when Alimah declines to wait any more after escaping an attempt by Prijaji Midie who wanted to forcefully make her his wife. Oei does not intent for Lort to fulfill his promise by making Alimah his wife officially, as he had ample opportunities for the next hundred or so pages after Alimah becomes Lort's Njai. This simple gesture allows us to draw

conclusions of the *Tionghoa peranakans* evident dislike of the Dutch whom they felt did not honour their promises as implied in their interactions with the Chinese.

The anti-imperialist sentiments of the *Tionghoa peranakans* echo the *pribumis* dislike of the Dutch. The feelings are not overt but clearly and openly described by the locals' disgust at the announcement of the impending 'marriage' between Alimah and Lort. The commotion their 'marriage' (Oei 1904: 153) generated in the small town of Kedoengpoelok needed police intervention. A Pak Nagaipah symptomatically pronounces her marriage to Lort as a betrayal of race and religion (Oei 1904: 172). Her father's (Nasiman) death comes quickly, as penance or vengeance, after it is claimed that he had sold his daughter (Oei 1904: 171) for the love of money. He indeed received a paltry sum of 100 f for Alimah from Lort. Clearly, the wise Pak Nagaipah sums up Oei's perception of the financial dependency between the Indies and Netherlands as the soul foundation of imperialism. The 'slave and master' relationship between the indigenes and the Dutch is played out in an ironic mode when Merto in *Oeij-Sey* (Thio Tjien Boen 1903: 13) decides to kill the white man he has been paid to guide through the jungle for the treasure that he is carrying in a box. As Merto lifts his machete to kill him, he addresses him as "„n'Doro!" (Thio Tjien Boen 1903: 13), while the white nameless Dutch man turns around and ends his life on the word 'God' (Thio Tjien Boen 1903: 13). The subject has clarified his position while ending the life of the colonizer who has thus far acted like a God to him and his people. But, *Oeij-Sey* (1903: 59) significantly calls Vigni, the Dutchman, '*pe kau*', a Chinese derogatory term, which literally mean 'white monkey'. Their animosity is not misplaced if Frances Gouda's (1995: 18) remarks about the colonial agenda bear any truth. He claims that:

...The Dutch colonial civil service [had] carefully studied, co-opted, and reshaped the ancient customs and legal traditions of Indonesians (adat), so they might reflect more comfortably the interests of the colonial community and provide labour power for the profitable export economy...

Another notable remark is the reference to the native labourers in their plantations as ...beasts who somewhat resemble human beings... whom they could therefore abuse without moral qualms... (Gouda 1995: 18).

To a certain extent, the animosity towards the Dutch colonial banded together the colonized Indonesian subjects that included the natives, the Chinese and the *Tionghoa peranakans*, which is recorded in Indonesian history as the rise to nationalism just before World War II. They became aware of their inhibited colonized state and the responsibility of the colonials toward them ironically through the efforts of the colonizer themselves. In 1899, Rudyard Kipling published his famous poem *White Man's Burden*, after the announcement of American's triumph in the Philippines. Van Deventer also published his well-known article in the Dutch review *De Gids*, entitled *Een Eereschuld* or *A Debt of Honour* by which the so-called 'ethical policy' was introduced as the Dutch felt

they had a moral obligation to the natives of East Indies (Wessling 1997: 30). Despite these efforts to assuage their guilt and the anger of their subjects, the Dutch colonial could not stop the natural flow toward nationalism and independence.

## HOMOGENISING NOTIONS OF NATIONHOOD

The postcolonial state of awareness and anti-colonial retaliation evident in the *Tionghoa peranakan* works has its own elements of nationalism that distinguish their predicament from other subalterns. Some of the works displayed a connectedness between the *Tionghoa peranakans* and the nation they have adopted as their own while others saw their future as Indonesians. For instance, the discordance between Handoko and his Dutch wife Jacoba in *Gila Mentega* by Anak Ponorogo (1920) and Dr. Lie's failed marriage to Marie Torp in *Dr. Lie...* by Madonna (1912) can be interpreted as a spark of nationalistic feelings. Anak Ponorogo ends the story with these words:

...*Seorang jang insaf pada kesoetjiannja kebangsa'an, biarpoen dari golongan bangsa apa sadja, tida aken hargaken sesoeatoe pengetjoet sematjem itoe. Tapi sesoeatoe istri-prempoean Timoer jang aseli – ada penoeh pengampoenan dan tjinta kasih dengan dasar kebatinan...* (1920: Preface) (A person who regrets his nation's purity, whether he is a bastard or not, is not to tolerate a coward like that. But if it is an original Asian woman – there will be full forgiveness and love based on her spirit.)

In celebrating the Asian woman, Anak Ponorogo is celebrating the essence of the Asian spirit and equating it to a nation's purity, which suggests a keenness for a national identity. The emergence of national consciousness of the *Tionghoa peranakans* appeared to be a part of the discoveries in their quest for an identity that was free of colonial subjugation. This is more evident in the discussion on marriage tropes where the idea of cleaving onto an Indonesian nation or servicing a colonial government was made apparent in the depiction of mixed marriages between the *Tionghoa peranakans*, *pribumis* and the Dutch colonial.

There are indications that in contemplating their hybrid identity, the *Tionghoa peranakans* are more receptive to embracing their alternative identity of being Indonesians rather than Dutch. The *Tionghoa peranakans* accepted their future and the possibility of an identity with the *pribumis* more positively than that of the colonials as suggested by the broken marriages and tragic relationships between the *Tionghoa peranakan* male characters and Dutch women as mentioned in the paragraph above. In the course of justice being done, the Dutch officers are either reliant on the *Tionghoa peranakan kapitan's* who oversaw the 'kongsi[-s]' (the dwelling place of the field workers) or is rendered hopelessly passive. Thai-Wi in *Korbanja Napsoe Brahi* by Lie In Eng (1923) manages to solve a complex murder, with the help of his son in the style of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's, Sherlock Holmes and faithful accomplice Watson

while Van Kloekloek whose investigations into the death of Boon Lim's father Giok Tjiang is left without a resolve at the end of the novel entitled *Binasa Lantaran Harta* (Hauw San Liang 1918). The Dutch are depicted to be powerless in the face of adversary such as Maurits van Dedemsvaart (Ngadiloeweh 1919) who is overcome by the poison fed to him by his *njai*.

While the Dutch are projected negatively, the *pribumis* are not. Thio Tjin Boen's works, *Cerita Njai Soemirah atawa Peruntungan Manusia* (1917) volumes 1 and 2 and *Anak Siapa? Djawa?* (1921) highlight some of the strengths of the *pribumi* through a study of the female indigene. Rini, Handoko's first wife who is cruelly discarded for Jakoba, after he completes his studies in Netherlands, not only survives her marginalization, but proceeds to build a successful business as a tailor to support her young daughter. She is as the author of the preface to *Kasopanan Timoer* (Dahlia 1927), full of forgiveness for her errant husband when he realizes his mistakes and begs her to accept him back again. Soekmi, another Javanese woman who catches the eye of Tjan Mo Seng because of her humble, quiet and hardworking attitude is celebrated as an epitome of Eastern sensibilities. After, Tjan dies, she returns to her hometown and runs a small eatery stall to sustain herself and her son. She later develops a batik business into a thriving conglomerate through sheer hard work, which the author is wont to emphasize. While both Rini and Soekmi are praised for their diligence and initiative, Soemirah (Thio Tjin Boen 1917) is seen to be loyal and wise in her faithfulness toward Bi Liang despite the ever-antagonistic Arkoem, an enemy of the family who seeks vengeance even after twenty years of exile.

It is obvious through their literature that some of the *Tionghoa peranakans* expressed a keen desire to pursue a relationship with the *pribumis* rather than the Dutch. The Indonesians or indigenous folks are acceptable because their values are equally conservative as opposed to the European colonial. The author of the novels that focus on mixed marriages like Thio Tjin Boen suggests that harmony can be achieved if each accords the other the respect that is due as shown by the couples, Soekmi and Tjan Mo Seng (1921) and Bi Liang and Soemirah (*Njai Soemirah* 1917). Thio advises:

...Menoeroet adapt Tionghoa, manoesia meosti hormayt, satoe tetamoe moesti berhormat oada toean roema. Begitoelah kita disini ada sebagai tetamoe patoet kita moesti taro hormat pada jang poenja negri, jiaitoe orang Djawa... (1921: 112) (According to the Chinese, a person must show respect, a guest must respect the owner of the house. This is the way we are, as guests, therefore we must respect the people whom the country belongs to, they are the Javanese).

## CONCLUSION

Those who still pause at the thought of acknowledging the existence of a 'post'colonial Indonesian literature in the form of the Indonesian *Tionghoa*

*peranakan* works, may first consider their claims on the ontological and epistemological evidence of colonialism in the Occidental lives of the *Tionghoa peranakans*. Foulcher's (1995: 147-171) search for a post-colonial Indonesian literature led him to conclude that Indonesia had ...slipped through the postcolonial net, jettisoning the colonial residue in its abandonment (or avoidance) of the colonial language (Foulcher 1995: 150). His quest for postcolonial Indonesian literature is perhaps hampered by a closed definition of a 'post-colonial phenomenon' which he claims is restricted to ...the study of writing in the colonial language, primarily writing in English and French in Africa and English in India and the Caribbean... (Foulcher 1995: 149). Limiting his scope to the texts written in English and French, his search for postcolonial literature was as good as valorizing the colonial languages suggesting that works in other marginal languages are not post-colonial, a fact that is as ironic to the post-colonial edict of breaking down boundaries between text and context, first instigated by Edward Said *Orientalism* (2003). He is closer to looking for the 'mimic men' in Frantz Fanon's liturgy of colonial subjects who try to imitate their colonial masters and live under the false impression of their superiority.

The *Tionghoa peranakan* works emphasize the need to acknowledge a people and the works of marginal colonial subjects who could speak [in reference to Gayatri Spivak's charge that subalterns could not speak) only through a hybrid language which they claimed for themselves in acts of writing against their colonial masters. As the analysis of the texts above has demonstrated, a diaspo[ric] people, marginalized by their hybridity in their own community, can and has developed a 'voice', through formal written literature that can only be considered 'sophisticated' in view of the age in which the works were written. These written works challenged, resisted and interrogated the colonial and their own identity in another country. It is not too presumptuous to say that the terms of analysis for establishing a postcolonial literature is solely about a recognition of in-authenticity, the presence of anti-colonial sentiments, or a struggle for individual freedom and a creation of an 'other' language being present in a text of colonial subjects, because it would shrink the very purpose of postcolonial[lity]. The phenomena of postcolonial[ity] itself should carry no boundaries or prejudices in its quest to unveil the extent of colonization and its effects. The *Tionghoa peranakan* works prove that time is not the great signifier of postcolonial phenomena neither is a foreign language a signal of silence. The analysis represents highlights of an undeniable discourse that happened against all odds, in the Dutch colonial era of the Indies, which has yet to be given a due recognition as the postcolonial legacy of Indonesian literature. This recognition of its postcolonial[ity] will perhaps draw attention away from the claims of inferiority that dogs the *Tionghoa peranakan* works and begin a new chapter in Indonesian literary history.



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