

Kekuatan Diam

Christina Dewi Elbers

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After over a century of waiting, the novel *De Stille Kracht*, is now finally available for Indonesian readers. The novel originally written in Dutch by Louis Marie-Anne Couperus (b. 1863, d. 1923) and was translated into Indonesian as *Kekuatan Diam* by Christina Dewi Elbers, a PhD candidate at the Universitas Gadjah Mada provides a vivid picture of the life and culture of a Dutch colony in the East Indies in the late 19th century. The novel *Kekuatan Diam* is classified as *Indische letteren*, a special term in the Dutch literary canon which is highly inspired by the Dutch colonial era in the East Indies. Some of the authors of the *Indische letteren* are of Indonesian descent, while others are native Dutch.

Louis Couperus is considered as one of the key figures in the Dutch literary canons. He wrote on several literary genres, but was most well-known as a psychological novelist. His works are commonly referred as “‘*Haagse*’ romans” (‘Den Haag’ romances). *De Stille Kracht* is one of his most outstanding works. The original Dutch edition of *De Stille Kracht* or *Kekuatan Diam* was first published by L.J. Veen in Amsterdam in 1900. The novel was later reprinted several times in the Netherlands. The latest edition was published by Atheneum-Polak & Van Genneep in Amsterdam in 2001 as part of a series entitled *Salamander Klassiek*.

Kekuatan Diam presents the sociological and psychological aspects of the lives of the Dutch community in Indonesia. Its literary narrative presents the challenges confronted by the Dutch in understanding the culture and society of the Javanese community in Indonesia in the 19th century. The protagonist of this novel is a native European named Otto van Oudijck. He serves as the Resident in a somewhat secluded imaginary community known as Labuwangi. Based on the many clues offered by the novel's narrative, it can be surmised that the setting of Labuwangi could possibly be located in East Java. He lives with his second wife Leonie in an official European-styled residency house staffed by indigenous maids. Leonie is a beautiful woman, but she is also a lonely soul. She is secretly having several affairs with men including her own stepsons Theo and Doddy. However, without her knowing, Doddy is also involved in a romantic relationship with Addy, the daughter of De Luce, the owner of a sugar refinery in Patjaram.

Van Oudijck has a very tense relationship with the Regent of Labuwangi Raden Adipati Soerio Soenario. He considers the Regent as incompetent for being unable to advise his brother, the Regent of Ngajiwa, who likes to gamble and smokes opium. Once during a party at the house of the Labuwangi residential secretary Onno Eldersma, a drunken Raden Adipati coarsely accuses Van Oudijck. Van Oudijck threatens to dismiss Raden Adipati from his obligations as the Regent of Labuwangi. Raden Adipati's mother, Raden Ayu Pangeran, who is petite but authoritative, objects to the way Van Oudijck treats her son. She makes a vow that she will retaliate in her own way and declares that all the Dutch will be driven out from the land of Java.

After this incident, the lives of Van Oudijck and other members of the European elite society continue as usual in Labuwangi. They continue to organize charity parties and hold social gatherings, whilst gossips about Leonie's infidelity begin to slowly spread among the society. However, lots of strange things begin to happen in Van Oudijck's house. At night, somebody starts to throw stones at the roof of the house and the sound of children's voices can be heard coming from the trees or inside the well. Leonie herself experiences an unsettling incident when she was alone in the bathroom where Leonie is splashed with juice

from chewed betel nut leaves out of nowhere. Van Oudijck also begins to receive anonymous letters. Later it is revealed that the letters are being sent from Van Oudijck's illegitimate child that he had with his former maid whose existence he has never revealed to Leonie.

Although previously skeptical of Javanese superstitions, Van Oudijck and Leonie begin to grow fearful of such subtle malevolent terrors. After being plagued by such strange events happening in or near their house, they begin to doubt their rationality. The couple also starts to quarrel more once their infidelity has been revealed to each other. The quiet and comfortable life of the minority Dutch elite society in Labuwangi gradually begins to crumble due to the unsettling supernatural disturbances. Eventually, Van Oudijck and Leonie decided to separate. The Resident, Raden Adipati also quits his job out of frustration and suddenly leaves Labuwangi. Leonie and several women from the families of Van Oudijck's former staff have also decided to return to Europe. Van Oudijck ultimately retreats to Garut where he lives on his pension with an indigenous woman. The official house of Labuwangi's Resident now lies empty and deserted. The threat from the Regent's mother becomes a reality: the invisible superstitious force of Java has managed to expel the Dutch from Labuwangi.

In *Kekuatan Diam*, Couperus had contrasted the plot with two different things: European rational minds and the spiritual nature of Eastern people who believe in mystics, witchcraft, and various other types of supernatural forces. By using native European, *Indo*, and indigenous Javanese characters, Couperus highlights the rich and mysterious nature of Javanese culture. *Kekuatan Diam* was intended to represent the tropical island of Java that has a complex and multifaceted traditions of magical and superstitious forces which most outsiders simply cannot comprehend. Despite the warm and friendly character of the Javanese people, invisible forces that exist can cause serious trouble for the Europeans. Couperus shows that the Indonesian/Javanese way to retaliate against European domination was to use magic and invoke superstition. Although the Dutch colonized the Indies for centuries, they were never able to understand the Indonesian people or their culture. As the famous Indonesian journalist from the end of the colonial era, Adinegoro once said: "*Sampai sekarang orang Belanda raba-raba dan tjari-tjari rahsia djiwa orang Indonesia*" (until now, the Dutch are still puzzled by the secrets of the Indonesian souls). This is cited from his work, *Kembali dari Perlawatan ke Europa, Djilid I*. Medan - Deli: N.V. Handel Mij. & Drukkerij Sjarikat Tapanoeli, 1930, p. 27. He continues

Djiwa orang Indonesia jang timboel dalam pengaroeh alam Indonesia, djaoeh berlainan dengan djiwa orang Belanda jang dipengaroehi oleh bagian alam di Europa [yang] terletak antara soengai Schelde, Maas dan Rijn. Indonesia tahoe diagak dan diagih. Europa tahoe dilagak dan ditagih. Europa mendasarkan penghidoepannya kepada hawa nafsoe (begeerte). 'Europa datang kepada kita dengan hawa nafsoenja', kata seorang ahli sair Hindoe Rabindranath Tagore, dan sebab itoe didapatnja pintoe hati kita tertoeetoeep dan terkoentji.

[The soul of the Indonesian people is influenced by nature. It is very different from the soul of the Dutch that is influenced by European nature, situated between the rivers Schelde, Maas and Rijn. The Indonesian people know about fittingness and appropriateness. The European only knows about making an impression and making demands. The European people base their lives on carnality (*begeerte*). 'The European people came to us with their carnality', said a Hindu poet, Rabindranath Tagore, and because of that they found our hearts' doors are closed and locked]. (p. 27-28).

Because of this ignorance, Europeans tend to construct many theories to explain the physiology, behavior, and character of the Indonesian people. As a strong literary narrative, *Kekuatan Diam* tries to expose this cultural ignorance. In his novel, Couperus seems to intend to criticize his own fellow European co-patriots. As Adinegoro had observed, Europeans were often 'unaware that their interactions with the Indonesians were deeply felt with many

ramifications and subtle affects' (*tidak insaf [...] bahwa pergaolean hidoep [dengan orang Indonesia] itoe ada djiwanja, banjak sjaratnja dan haloes iklimnja*) (ibid., p. 27).

A small museum has been built to remember Louis Couperus in Den Haag in the Netherlands. It is located on Javastraat. Coincidentally, the name of the street where the museum is located was similar to the one mentioned in the novel. The novel, geographically and culturally set on the island of Java, reflects the long history of rationalistic prejudice that the Dutch had towards the mystical dimensions of natural and cultural heritage of the Indonesian people, Javanese in particular. Joseph Rudyard Kipling once wrote: "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." It seems pretty clear that Couperus' *Kekuatan Diam* reflects the English poet's most famous quote.

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