

Max Havelaar: The Book That Killed Colonialism?

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Pramoedya Ananta Toer (Pram) in his essay entitled "[The Book That Killed Colonialism](#)" published by The New York Times Magazine on April 18, 1999 – which also became the preface to the English translation of the novel *Max Havelaar*, published by NYRB Classics (2019) – claims that *Max Havelaar* was the book that successfully killed colonialism. Pram writes:

The book recounts the experiences of one Max Havelaar, an idealistic Dutch colonial official in Java. In the story, Havelaar encounters – and then rebels against – the system of forced cultivation imposed on Indonesia's peasants by the Dutch Government.

[...]

Concern for the impact of the colonial policies on the Indonesian people had marked the career of Dekker, who originally studied to be a minister.

[...]

The publication of *Max Havelaar* in 1859 was nothing less than earth-shaking. Just as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* gave ammunition to the American abolitionist movement, *Max Havelaar* became the weapon for a growing liberal movement in the Netherlands, which fought to bring about reform in Indonesia. Helped by *Max Havelaar*, the energised liberal movement was able to shame the Dutch Government into creating a new policy known as the Ethical Policy, the major goals of which were to promote irrigation, interisland migration and education in the Dutch Indies.

One of the facts that Pram presented as historical evidence to prove that *Max Havelaar* was a book that killed colonialism, was the discontinuation of the *Cultuurstelsel* (the forced cultivation system), which then led to the implementation of the Ethical Policy. One of the programs of this policy was to allow indigenous Indonesians to obtain colonial education. Although, only Indonesian aristocrats enjoyed this privilege.

For Pram, the "education" factor held significant importance and embodied the positive aspect of the Dutch Ethical Policy. Because "the expansion of educational opportunities, which returned to the colonised peoples of the world a right they had been forced to forfeit under Western colonisation -- the right to determine their own futures." Although by the "colonised peoples" he only meant "a small number of Indonesians, primarily the children of traditional rulers."

We see that there is a contradiction here. *Max Havelaar* basically describes how corrupt the indigenous rulers of the Dutch East Indies were, during the Dutch colonial period. But the Dutch Ethical Policy (which was claimed to be the direct result of the publication of *Max Havelaar*) within the context of education was in fact only beneficial to indigenous aristocrat families, even worse, Pram claimed that “the expansion of educational opportunities, returned to the colonised peoples of the world a right they had been forced to forfeit under Western colonisation -- the right to determine their own futures.” Did Pram think that the indigenous aristocrat rulers and their children suffered as much as millions of common people in terms of being the subject of colonialism? Suppose it is the same, then why the novel of *Max Havelaar*, which tells the story of how evil the indigenous rulers were, was claimed as “a book that killed colonialism”?!

This kind of contradiction is at the centre of Pram's well-known phrase above. This famous and often cited assertive claim is naive and ahistorical. Because it implies that the Ethical Policy was indeed very good for the colonised peoples, without any historical consequences except “independence” for Indonesia.

Pram's claim even led to the founding of an organisation in Indonesia, which stated that they, as “a journalist initiative that wants to serve the public by giving a platform to marginalised voices and neglected communities and by [asking attention for] fundamental issues that are being side-lined”, chose “Multatuli” as their name: *Project Multatuli*. The ironic climax following Pram's statement is the establishment of a literacy community whose main focus of activity is reading and studying the novel *Max Havelaar*, in combination with the establishment of the Multatuli Museum which was dubbed as “the first anti-colonial museum in Indonesia”, both of which are located in Lebak which is also the location where the story of *Max Havelaar* took place.

Pram forgot, or maybe he did not know, that economy-wise, the *Cultuurstelsel* was later replaced by a policy that allowed the emergence of private plantation capitalism, such as in Deli, North Sumatra. Although unintentionally, the irony is that Pram had touched on this issue when he wrote what I quoted earlier at the beginning of this essay: “helped by *Max Havelaar* ... the energised liberal movement was able to shame the Dutch Government into creating a new policy known as the Ethical Policy.”

The Liberal Party in the Netherlands was very aggressive in criticising the *Cultuurstelsel* in the Dutch East Indies during the second half of the 19th century. They succeeded in forcing the Dutch government to end the *Cultuurstelsel* and replace it with the Agrarian Law in 1870. It was the 1870 Agrarian Law that resulted in the economic liberalisation [of government-owned companies] in the Dutch East Indies. The *Cultuurstelsel*, primarily led by the [colonial] government, was eventually replaced by a *laissez-faire* economic system in which economic activities were handled by the private sector. With deregulation, as a result, the 1870 Agrarian Law allowed the emergence of privately-owned plantation companies. Plantation owners could lease large plots of land for a maximum

period of 75 years for the purpose to plant rubber, tea, coffee, oil palm, sugar cane and tobacco. The *Cultuurstelsel* was eventually replaced with *laissez-faire* capitalism whose negative effects on the [indigenous] economy and ecology were far more severe and led to the practice of slave labour, also known as the *Kuli Kontrak* (contract labour), used on tobacco and rubber plantations in Deli, North Sumatra.

The birth of the Ethical Policy as a reaction to the negative effects of the liberal economic policy after the 1870 Agrarian Law was implemented, did not necessarily end the free-market economy. It can even be said that the Ethical Policy was just cosmetic polish to cover up the cruel face of this liberal free-market economy to make it look more humanistic.

Conrad Theodor van Deventer was one of the most influential liberal figures in the formulation of the Ethical Policy in the Dutch East Indies. During his tenure as a member of Parliament from the Liberal Democratic Party, he wrote an essay entitled "*Een Eereschuld*" (A Debt of Honour) which was published in 1899 in a Dutch journal called *De Gids*. Van Deventer stated that the Dutch had to pay back to the indigenous people a debt of honour because they had exploited the wealth of the Dutch East Indies. Van Deventer stressed the importance of increasing the welfare of the indigenous population, the decentralisation of the government and the employment of more indigenous people in key government positions. Van Deventer's proposals later became the beginning of what was known as the Ethical Policy. There were important pillars that became the core of the Ethical Policy, which was inaugurated on 17 September 1901: irrigation, transmigration, and education.

Clearly, it is not as simple as the reasons that Pram gave on why the Ethical Policy was implemented in the Dutch East Indies. Even if we include the influence of *Max Havelaar* on this matter, it was not as dominant as Pram suggested in his essay. This slight influence was only there because the Liberals in the Netherlands used the book as a political tool against the Dutch government's policy, which was called the *Cultuurstelsel* or the forced cultivation system and replaced it with a *laissez-faire* policy of liberal market capitalism. So, as history has repeatedly proven, once the *laissez-faire* policy of liberal market capitalism was successfully implemented, Dutch colonialism entered a new period that was even more violent than at the time of the *Cultuurstelsel*. And ironically, in the end, it was the Conservatives that played their card against them and used *Max Havelaar* to fuel their political propaganda after the Liberals were no longer in power in the Netherlands! As part of their propaganda, both Dutch political parties repeatedly used the slogan "in the interest of the natives". *Max Havelaar*, a novel that describes the suffering of the indigenous people due to the *Cultuurstelsel*, was clearly just a propaganda tool that cannot be ignored.

The publication of *Max Havelaar* did not end colonialism as Pram believed, but rather it marked the beginning of genuine colonialism. In a sense: Dutch colonialism before that was only in the form of physical colonialism, but after the implementation of the Ethical Policy, of which one of the main goals was to establish schools dedicated to the indigenous population, colonial practices also included non-physical exploitations such as [influencing]

ways of thinking, tastes, and morality. This was systematically carried out through colonial education provided to the ruling class of the nations they colonised. For Van Deventer, the Ethical Policy aimed to create a Western-minded indigenous elite that felt indebted to the Dutch for their prosperity and high culture. Or in the context of British colonialism in India, this was similar to what Lord Macaulay, Member of the Supreme Council of India for Colonial Education, stated in the minute 'on Indian Education' in 1835:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.

Hybridity is a concept in postcolonial theory popularised by Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994). Hybridity refers to the creation of new transcultural forms in a contact zone, as a result of colonial occupation, which Bhabha called the Third Space. Hybridity occurs in many forms: linguistic, cultural, political, racial, and others. Colonial education as implemented during the Dutch Ethical Policy was one of the contact zones or the third space that produced a new hybrid transcultural form, namely the indigenous educated elite.

Hybridity is a cross between two separate races, plants or cultures. A hybrid is the result of something mixed. Hybridity is not a new historical phenomenon; it has been a feature of all civilisations. Both ancient and modern civilisations, through trade and conquests, have borrowed foreign ideas, philosophies, and thus produced hybrid cultures and societies. Indonesian culture is an example of a hybrid culture produced as a result of Indian, Chinese, Arabic, and European cultures, mixed with the local cultures of the archipelago that has been going on for thousands of years.

Pram provided a fitting description of what hybridity is about, through Minke, the protagonist in his novel *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth of Mankind, 1980). Minke is an example of a postcolonial hybrid, a result of colonial education that according to Frantz Fanon characterises as “black skin, white masks”, or according to Homi Bhabha is “almost the same but not white”.

The Dutch Ethical Policy did not succeed in producing what was originally hoped for, especially in the field of education. Unlike, for example, Myanmar under British colonialism and the Philippines when it was under Spanish and United States rule, the Dutch East Indies had a very poor number of schools and the literacy rate was very low. In 1900, There were only 1,500 primary schools in the entire Dutch East Indies for a population of over 36 million people. In the late 1930s, there were only a handful of high school graduates and the literacy rate was slightly above 6 per cent. This was also exacerbated by the Dutch government, which implemented a segregation system at all levels of school. According to Adrian Vickers in *A History of Modern Indonesia* (2013), Western education was only made available to the indigenous population during the early twentieth century. In 1900, 1,500

indigenous Indonesians were enrolled in European schools, whilst there were 13,000 European students recorded at the same period. By 1928, nearly 75,000 indigenous Indonesians had completed Western primary education and 6,500 had completed high school, a very small number compared to the total population of the Dutch East Indies.

The main problem that hindered the success of the Dutch Ethical Policy was that the allocated education budget was not enough and the financial crisis due to the global economic depression in the 1930s eventually marked the end of the white man's burden policy of the Dutch colonial government.

What about the results of the educational program that was part of the Ethical Policy? Was it indeed as great as Pram claims when he wrote that a handful of Dutch-educated Indonesians “fostered a movement for emancipation and freedom, which eventually led, in the 1940's, to full-scale revolution.”?

The Ethical Policy also produced a group of early educated indigenous Indonesians, who, through their very well-known second congress in 1928, signed the *Sumpah Pemuda* (Youth Pledge). However, this initiative only talked about issues regarding “homeland, nation, and language”, there was no discussion about a country named “Indonesia” that later was going to replace the colonial state of the Dutch East Indies! Likewise, a very well-known debate that was also held by the first generation of the indigenous intellectual elite – called the *Polemik Kebudayaan* (Cultural Polemic) during the 1930s – did not talk about the goal to establish a new state independent from the Netherlands. Instead, they were busy talking about the uniqueness and greatness of the West and the East, which apparently were admired and supported by each of these two groups! They never even once talked about the conditions of their colonisation, as if they were not living under Dutch colonialism at that moment! (I have discussed this at length in my essay titled *Globalitas dan Lokalitas Dalam “Membayangkan Indonesia”: Sebuah Kritik Pascakolonial* (Globality and Locality in 'Imagining Indonesia': A Postcolonial Critique.) In fact, in August 1945, Sukarno and Hatta, who came from the first generation of the colonial educated elite as a result of the Ethical Policy, were kidnapped by the youth and then threatened and held at gunpoint to make sure they were going to read the text of the Indonesian Proclamation of Independence. Initially, they both refused to do it based on the argument that the Japanese had promised Indonesian independence, which was originally planned to be granted in September 1945! The uprising of nationalist groups on a national scale was not carried out by the Dutch educated indigenous elite but it was carried out by the labours and peasants under the leadership of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) in 1926-1927.

Pram's claim that the educational program, which was part of the Dutch Ethical Policy, had a great impact on the movements that fought for independence, which eventually gave birth to a newly independent nation called the Republic of Indonesia, glosses over many major historical events that greatly determined the process of decolonisation of the Dutch East Indies. One of them was the outbreak of the Second World

War and the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies after which the Dutch colonial government decided to run away, neglecting its citizens! The Japanese occupation, the militarisation of the indigenous population, and the prohibition of all Dutch things, including the use of Dutch language, which made the *Melayu Pasar* (Malay Creole) language increasingly popular, a language that was later adopted as the Indonesian national language, were factors that were actually far more dominant than the colonial education of a few indigenous *priyayi* (Javanese aristocrats). The revolution in the 1940s was an armed revolution, not a STOVIA revolution¹, which was expected to occur after the indigenous people were trained and armed by the Japanese military forces that later became known as the *Pembela Tanah Air* (PETA, Defenders of the Homeland). There were 69 battalions of PETA militias in Java (about 37,000 troops) and Sumatra (about 20,000 troops) at the time of the proclamation of Indonesian independence on 17 August 1945. Unlike the Netherlands, the Japanese facilitated the politicisation of indigenous Indonesians down to the village level. The Japanese educated, trained, and armed many indigenous youths and allowed nationalist leaders to be politically active. Through the abolishment of the Dutch colonial regime and the facilitation of Indonesian nationalism, the Japanese occupation had created the conditions that made it possible for the proclamation of Indonesian independence to take place a few days after the Japanese capitulation.

If indeed the propaganda of the Dutch Liberals was true, as one of the goals of the Ethical Policy was to build national awareness amongst the indigenous peoples in the Dutch East Indies, then why did the Netherlands, in a very aggressive and violent manner, recolonise Indonesia, which has proclaimed its independence as a new country in 1945? It was only 4 years later, on 27 December 1949, after both countries went through an armed conflict that had caused so many victims, materials, and lives, that they were ready to recognise Indonesia's "sovereignty". The Dutch were only willing to acknowledge the date of Indonesia's independence, namely 17 August 1945, on 16 August 2005, one day before the 60th anniversary of the proclamation of Indonesian independence!

Pram's essay "The Book That Killed Colonialism" does not discuss the textual content of *Max Havelaar*, but only tells a general story about the history of the relationship between spices and colonialism.

Is it true that *Max Havelaar* is the book that killed colonialism? More importantly: Is *Max Havelaar* an anti-colonial novel?

Max Havelaar is a text that is part of what is called colonial discourse. The term "colonial discourse" was introduced by Edward Said in his well-known book titled *Orientalism* (1978). He borrowed this term from the concept of "discourse" that was introduced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault in his book *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969). According to the latter, discourse referred to a system of thought,

¹ STOVIA: School Tot Opleiding van Inlandsche Artsen (School to educate Native Physicians).

knowledge, or communication that constructs an experience. A system of statements by which the world can be identified. A system that is used by dominant groups in society to create a field of truth by imposing certain knowledge, disciplines, and values on the dominated groups. As a social construct, this system works to create a reality that is intended not only for the objects it represents but also for the subjects that make up the community on which it relies. A system of thought consisting of ideas, attitudes, actions, beliefs, and practices that systematically construct the subject and the world they speak of. The function of discourse is to give legitimacy to the power of society to construct contemporary truths, maintain them, and determine the power relations between the constructed truths; discourse is a medium of communication in which power relations produce men and women who can speak. For Said, colonial discourse was a complex network of signs and practices that govern social existence and reproduction in colonial relations. Philology, lexicography, history, biology, political and economic theory, novels, and lyrical poetry are all part of what Said calls the Orientalist colonial discourse.

Colonial discourse is a system of statements that can be made about the colony and colonial peoples, about colonial power and the relationship between the two. A system of knowledge and beliefs about the world in which colonisation occurs and acts as rules of inclusion and exclusion that operate with assumptions of the superiority of culture, history, language, art, political structures, social conventions of the colonisers, and the existence of a belief that the colonised people needed to be uplifted through the colonial touch. Colonial discourse represents the colonised as “primitive” and the coloniser as “civilised”.

Let us examine the language and diction used in Max Havelaar's speech at the beginning of his arrival in Lebak below:

I heartily salute you all.

When the Governor-General commanded me to come to you as Assistant Resident in this district, my heart rejoiced. You know that I had never set foot on Bantam-Kidool; therefore, I have obtained information about your district, and have seen that there is much good in Bantam-Kidool. Your people possess rice-fields in the valleys, and there are rice-fields on the mountains. And you wish to live in peace, and you do not desire to live in those districts that are inhabited by other persons. Yes, I know that there is much good in Bantam-Kidool.

But not on that account alone did my heart rejoice; for elsewhere, also, I should have found much good.

But I discovered that your population is poor, and therefore I rejoiced with all my soul.

For I know that Allah loves the poor, and that He gives riches to whomsoever He will try; but to the poor He sends all who speak His word, that they may rise in the midst of their misery.

Does not He give rain when the blade would otherwise wither, and a dewdrop in the cup of the thirsty flower?

And is it not sublime to be sent to seek them that are weary, who have lingered behind after the work and have fallen down exhausted on the road, because their knees were not strong enough to carry them to the place where they should receive their wages? Should not I be glad to give a helping hand to him who tumbled into the ditch, and a staff to him who climbs the mountains?

Should not my heart leap with joy when it sees that I have been selected amongst many to turn lamentation into prayer, weeping into thanksgiving?

Yes, I am very glad to be in Bantam-Kidool.

I said to the woman who shares my sorrows and increases my happiness: 'Rejoice, for I see that Allah gives a blessing on the head of our child! He has sent me to a place where work is to be done, and He thought me worthy to be there before harvest-time. For the joy is not in cutting *paddy*; the joy is in cutting the paddy which one has planted. And the soul of man does not rejoice in wages, but in the labour that earns those wages.' And I said to her: 'Allah has given us a child; and there will come a time when he shall say: "Do you know that I am *his* son?" and then there will be those in the country who will greet him with love, who will put a hand on his head and say: "Sit down to our dinner, and live in our house, and take your portion of what we have; for we knew your father."'

For, chiefs of Lebak, there is much to be done in your district.

Tell me, is not the labourer poor! Does not your paddy often ripen for those who did not plant it? Are there not many wrongs in your country? Is not the number of your children small?

[...]

Is there no bitterness in journeying from here to the South coast, in seeing the mountains that have no water on their sides, or the plains where the buffalo never drew the plough?

Yes, yes, I tell you, that your soul and mine are sad because of these things; and, therefore, we are grateful to Allah, that He has given us the power to labour here.

[...]

I have been sent here to be your friend, your elder brother. Should not you warn your younger brother, if you saw a tiger in his way?

Chiefs of Lebak, we have often committed faults, and our country is poor, because we have committed so many faults.

For in Cikande, Bolang, and Krawang, in the regions round about Batavia, there are many men who were born in our country, and who have left our country.

Why do they seek labour far from the place where they buried their parents? Why have they fled from the village where they were circumcised? Why do they prefer the coolness of the tree that grows there, to the shade of our woods?

And even there to the North-West, over the sea, are many who ought to be our children, but who have left Lebak to wander in foreign countries with Keris and Klewang and gun! And there they die miserably; for the Government has power to beat the rebels.

Chiefs of Lebak! we are all of us in the service of the King of Holland. But he, who is just, and desires that we should perform our duty, is far from here. Thirty times a thousand thousand souls, nay more, are under his rule, but he cannot be near all of those who are dependent on his will.

The Governor-General at Buitenzorg is just, and desires that everyone should do his duty; but powerful as he is, and commanding all authority in the cities, and the elders of the villages, and disposing of the army on land, and of the ships at sea, he likewise can no more than the King see where injustice has been done, for the injustice is far from him.

[...]

Chiefs of Lebak! Who shall then do justice in Bantam-Kidool?

[...]

I wish to live on good terms with you, and therefore I beg you to regard me as your friend. Everyone who has erred may reckon on a lenient sentence from me, for as I err so often myself, I shall not be severe; at least not in ordinary mistakes or negligences. Only where negligence becomes a custom, I will oppose it. Of faults of a more grave kind - of tyranny and extortion, I do not speak-such a thing shall not happen; is it not so, Regent?

Well then, gentlemen, chiefs of Bantam-Kidool! let us be glad that our province is so poor. We have a noble work before us.

There are many other examples in *Max Havelaar* where the indigenous [Javanese] and their culture are represented as everything that is negative and opposite to the standard of the West and thus, must be saved by the West through colonialism. The depiction of the coloniser as the messenger of God who came to save the colonised from themselves is an apparent characteristic feature of *Max Havelaar* that distinguishes it from the majority of other colonial novels.

Besides his paternalistic and orientalist attitude towards indigenous people, Max Havelaar also opposed the indigenous resistance against Dutch colonialism. This is illustrated by his experience in Natal, North Sumatra and in Ambon where he managed to suppress the indigenous Ambonese resistance against the Dutch colonial government. He was annoyed that the Dutch colonial government did not give him enough support! Max Havelaar also stated that he could not understand why General Van Damm (the pseudonym

for the Governor of the West Coast of Sumatra who was based in Padang at that time, Andreas Victor Michiels) did not conquer North Sumatra and Aceh even though it was easy to make up excuses for such a conquest, although the London Treaty of 1824 with England, declared a ban on such acts. "Annexing a province is always easier than taking over a mill," are the words of Max Havelaar.

Who is Max Havelaar/Multatuli/Eduard Douwes Dekker really? How accurate is the myth that has been propagated and reproduced continuously in Indonesia for so long: that he was a colonial figure who defended the oppressed peoples of the Dutch East Indies? Was he truly anti-colonial? Or was he, as Pram put it: A Dutch colonial official in Java [who] witnessed – and then rebelled against – the system of forced cultivation imposed on Indonesian peasants by the Dutch Government?

The deconstruction of the myth on Max Havelaar/Multatuli/Eduard Douwes Dekker was carried out properly by an Indo author Rob Nieuwenhuys in his book *Mirror of the Indies: A History of Dutch Colonial Literature* (1982) and especially in the *Mitos Dari Lebak* (The Myth from Lebak, 2019). Through the extraction of historical documents from the time when Max Havelaar/Multatuli/Eduard Douwes Dekker lived in Lebak, Rob Nieuwenhuys was able to prove that all the heroic stories about Max Havelaar/Multatuli/Eduard Douwes Dekker's actions whilst serving as Assistant Resident in Lebak, were not accurate.

I take the following historical facts from the two books of Rob Nieuwenhuys above, which I think should be widely read in Indonesia.

Eduard Douwes Dekker sent a letter of complaint to the resident Brest van Kempen that the Regent in his area of government, namely Raden Adipati Karta Nataganara, had abused his power by extortion. He formally requested that the Regent of Lebak be investigated. When the resident, who incidentally was his superior, asked him to show evidence for his complaint, Douwes Dekker refused and only said that he would be responsible for his complaint. Obviously, Douwes Dekker's response could not be accepted by his superior, who then eventually forwarded his complaint to a higher-ranking official. It is known that Douwes Dekker's complaint eventually resulted in him being removed from his position as Assistant Resident of Lebak.

In fact, Douwes Dekker was not fired but rather resigned from his position, despite that he was offered the same job as Assistant Resident in Ngawi, East-Java.

Douwes Dekker did not understand the culture and society of Banten, he had great respect for European norms and values that he accepted as his standard of measurement. As reflected in his speech during the ceremony for his arrival in Lebak, Douwes Dekker's attitude was very paternalistic and orientalist towards the Regents and other indigenous people.

Payment of tribute and voluntary work done by the people for traditional heads in Javanese society was a common thing. The type and amount of the tribute varied according to the place, more so depending on particular circumstances. Even the Dutch East Indies government had stipulated it in colonial regulations. This clearly shows how Douwes Dekker had ignored, and was intolerant of, local traditions whose existence had been officially recognised by the colonial government where he worked. He slandered the Regent of Lebak who served as the traditional head, accusing him of having committed extortion and abuse of power.

Multatuli/Eduard Douwes Dekker never criticised Dutch colonialism, but instead supported it and because of that, he worked many times for the colonial administration of the Dutch East Indies. If he was truly anti-colonial, he would definitely have refused to work for the interests of the Dutch Indies colonial government. Not only did he not refuse but he even became one of the Dutch colonial officials as Assistant Resident!

The main reason why Multatuli wrote *Max Havelaar* was his deep disappointment due to his removal as Assistant Resident of Lebak, which meant that he would never reach the highest social class in colonial Indies society. So severe was his disappointment that he said to have been able to finish writing his novel in less than three weeks!

When the rumours that Multatuli was about to publish a novel reached the Dutch East Indies colonial government, they contacted him and asked him not to publish it. Multatuli replied that he was willing not to publish his novel on the condition that he was given a new official position in the colonial government, namely the position of Resident. He also wanted to become a member of the Council of the Dutch East Indies and demanded a large amount of money, including a medal of honour for his services. In a letter dated 20 November 1859 to his wife Tine, Multatuli/Eduard Douwes Dekker wrote: "I have thought it over, and I'm inclined to accept Rochussen's proposal but my conditions are: 1. The position of Resident on Java, especially Passaruang in order to repay my debts (this district provided its Resident with a high percentage of its agricultural profits); 2. Restoration of time served, to count toward a pension; 3. A generous cash advance, and a medal in the Order of the Netherlands Lion. But I do not want to openly state these terms but wait rather to see what he will do." Obviously, such absurd conditions were rejected by the Dutch East Indies colonial government. This again proves that Multatuli wrote *Max Havelaar* not to fight the injustices that happened to the indigenous people of the Dutch East Indies but rather as a protest against the injustices that he thought the Dutch East Indies colonial government had done to him!

Max Havelaar was not written as a form of protest against the colonial government whose actions crossed the line, but it was rather a protest against the colonial government which was considered to be less strict in implementing its policies. The main point of criticism in *Max Havelaar* was that the attitude of the Dutch East Indies colonial government was weak towards its colony!

For Multatuli, the Dutch Indies colonial government did not implement noble Dutch values and norms, such as justice and humanitarian spirit, but instead he found them way too soft on indigenous people by allowing them to maintain their values, which he considered as negative, to influence the Dutch values and norms of the Enlightenment. The indigenous people had to be rescued from their corrupt values and norms by their wise superiors, namely the officials of the Dutch East Indies colonial government, which in the case of Lebak, was Multatuli himself.

Max Havelaar fought for the reform of the Dutch East Indies colonial system, not the abolition of colonialism itself. Because at the end of the novel, Multatuli claims that he is Max Havelaar, whilst Multatuli was the pen name of Eduard Douwes Dekker. So, it can also be said that fighting for the reform of the Dutch East Indies colonial system was everything for Multatuli/Eduard Douwes Dekker and not its abolition!

Apart from the fact that the novel did not kill colonialism, the book was also not the reason that the Ethical Policy was implemented. *Max Havelaar* was not the only book that “criticised” the Dutch colonial policy in the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century. Before the publication of *Max Havelaar*, criticism of the *Cultuurstelsel* was already widespread in the Netherlands. As Pram himself mentioned, the Dutch liberals were very critical of it and *Max Havelaar* was just one of the political tools they cleverly used. These Dutch liberals were actually responsible for making *Max Havelaar* a book that seemed to oppose Dutch colonialism. And ironically, after their goal was achieved, it was their enemy, the Dutch conservatives, who then used *Max Havelaar* to attack the liberals who were in power in the Netherlands at the end of the 19th century!

It was not only Pram who praised *Max Havelaar* as high as the sky, Bakri Siregar, the Indonesian literary critic of LEKRA², joined the choir of praise too. In his book *Sedjarah Sastera Modern Indonesia* (the History of Modern Indonesian Literature, 1964), Bakri Siregar wrote that “Multatuli ruthlessly accused colonialism and the Dutch as being responsible for the economic exploitation and political oppression of the *Cultuurstelsel* (forced cultivation system).” I am really amazed. I don't know which version of *Max Havelaar* these two big LEKRA figures read!

It is ironic how these two figures of “*seni untuk rakyat*” (art for the people) never mentioned, let alone talked about, several novels that revealed the poor working and living conditions of the indigenous coolies in the colonial tobacco and rubber plantations in Deli, North Sumatra, which was widely referred to as “outdoor prisons.” The novels of the Hungarian-Dutch couple, Ladislao Szekely and Madelon Szekely-Lulofs entitled *Tropic Fever: The Adventures of a Planter in Sumatra, Rubber, and Coolie* were published in Hungarian, Dutch and English languages in the 1930s and it reveals the life of this couple and their life

² The Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (Institute for the People's Culture) or LEKRA was a left-leaning cultural organisation. LEKRA was founded in 1950.

on a plantation in Deli. Novels such as these deserve to be called books that defend the oppressed indigenous people and that are truly anti-colonial!

Glossary

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