

Friendship, Politics and Belonging to a Colonised Home in Hella Haasse's *Oeroeg*

The identity of those born into a ruling colonial elite is almost certain to be complex and problematic. It is 'ambiguous and hence unsettling, as they are at once linked with their motherland and their land of belonging'.¹ Hella S. Haasse recognises the difficult nature of this identity in her own life, saying in *Zelfportret als legkaart*, 'Ik ben in Indië geboren en toch ben ik er misschien nooit iets anders geweest dan een vreemdelinge'² and her first novel, *Oeroeg* (1948), reflects such issues in the struggle of its nameless narrator to develop and maintain his identity and a sense of 'home'. This struggle is presented alongside and often intertwined with the distant relationship with his parents (the administrator of a colonial plantation and his wife) and the development and decline of his friendship with the native Indonesian son of his father's foreman, the eponymous Oeroeg. The process of this friendship's dissolution is linked with the boys' education and a growing awareness on Oeroeg's part of the power imbalances enshrined in the political and economic structures of *Nederlands-Indië*. I intend to show that the interplay of these various factors shapes, challenges and ultimately leads to a total crisis in the narrator's fragile identity and tenuous sense of belonging to Indonesia.

The narrator's early childhood is marked by a great emotional distance from his parents. His father spends most of his time on work and his mother seems to show little interest in her son. The narrator remarks that her coming into his room before he went to sleep was rare (p.9)³ and that he normally ate at a different time from his parents, being given food by a servant. In fact, on the occasions when he did eat with his parents, he recalls that 'I never felt comfortable' (p.8).

In lieu of any parental warmth, the narrator cultivates what Maier describes as 'an intimate friendship with Oeroeg' which colours every memory he has of his childhood

¹ Maier, Henk M. J., 'Escape from the Green and Gloss of Java: Hella S. Haasse and Indies Literature', *Indonesia*, no. 77 (April 2004): 81.

² Cited in Nieuwenhuys, Rob, *Oost-Indische Spiegel: Wat Nederlandse schrijvers en dichters over Indonesië hebben geschreven, vanaf de eerste jaren der Compagnie tot op heden* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1972): 529.

³ In this essay I will take citations from Margaret M. Alibasah's translation into English under the title *Forever a Stranger* in *Forever a Stranger and Other Stories* (Kuala Lumpur; Oxford; Singapore; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). I will, however, refer to the novel by the title of the original Dutch. I will indicate the page number in the text.

(pp.1-2).⁴ He recalls that 'I felt at home at Oeroeg's' (p.6), a straightforward claim to belong never once imitated in connection with his European heritage. Even when Oeroeg's family move to a village away from the plantation, the narrator says, 'I never had the feeling of being an outsider amongst these people; on the contrary. Even in the dilapidated village house, on a muddy piece of land, I felt more at home than in the hollow dimly lighted rooms of our house' (pp.25-26). That Oeroeg and his family play a far more important role in providing the narrator with a sense of warmth, security and belonging – in short, a feeling of 'home' – is confirmed as the narrator travels with his parents, their dinner guests and two servants to Telaga Hideung, a lake in the mountains supposed to be the lair of a child-eating vampire, seen by the young narrator as a deeply threatening and mysterious place. We are told that only the presence of Deppoh, Oeroeg's father, provides the narrator with a sense of security (p.15), in comparison with his parents who have seemed to be only faintly aware of his presence throughout the evening.

The narrator's ability to express himself more effectively in Sundanese than in Dutch (p.11) underscores the alienation of the narrator from his European roots, or rather a deeper identification with Java than with the Netherlands. His friendship with Oeroeg, 'the alphabet of my childhood' (p.43), in contrast with the detached attitude of his parents, is a starting point for his feeling attached to Indonesia as 'the land of my birth [...] the earth from which I do not wish to be transplanted' (p.85). Of course, it would be wrong to suggest that there is anything particularly extraordinary about a certain detachment on the part of wealthy European parents in a colony at this time; it is entirely normal that the day-to-day care of the narrator should be given over to a *baboe*, and Indonesian nanny. This would, however, seem to strengthen even further the feeling that the narrator has a closer relationship to Indonesia than to his parents' fatherland.

For their part, his parents recognise the start of this process and try to reverse it, his father habitually complaining that 'He can't speak one decent word of Dutch [...] He's turning into the veriest *kacung* (native boy)' and suggesting the narrator be kept at

⁴ Maier, 'Escape from the Green and Gloss of Java': 79.

home (p.8). This is the first indication of a tension between the narrator's perception of who he is and the assumptions made by others that he represents the Netherlands, a 'fatherland' for which he betrays no love. The introduction of a tutor in the Dutch language, Mijnheer Bollinger, is an attempt to 'correct' the narrator's sense of cultural allegiance, but Oeroeg is persistently present, if not involved, during the lessons, a persistent reminder of the identity which has organically evolved through the narrator's friendship with Oeroeg and the futility of trying to artificially alter it.

This is not to say that the narrator identifies himself as being a native Indonesian with the same heritage as Oeroeg; he does identify differences in attitudes, most notably towards the care of animals, and puts these differences down to his Western heritage:

[...] Oeroeg took little pleasure in the regular care and maintenance of [his] menagerie. His attention slackened where mine began [...] He amused himself by having two different kinds of animal fight each other [...] Perhaps it would be going too far to call this cruelty. Oeroeg was not cruel; only he did not have the feeling that makes a Westerner often want to save and respect an animal out of a half-conscious sense of relatedness. (pp.5-6)

Rather, his identity is hybrid; he is a Westerner whose homeland is *Nederlands-Indië*. It is telling the Dutch adult with whom the narrator identifies most closely, Gerard, who replaces Mijnheer Bollinger after the discovery of the tutor's affair with the narrator's mother, is also the son of Dutch parents sent to the Indies in connection with colonial government who 'lost his heart to Java' and has 'no desire to go to Holland' (p.30). He shares this hybrid identity.

It is the boys' entry into the education system which begins the gradual decline in their friendship, as their lives and thoughts become more affected by the political structures of *Nederlands-Indië*. At first, during their primary school years, they still travel to and from school together, delighting in much the same things, and their education is similar, though Oeroeg's attending a school set up to cater for native Indonesians, while the

narrator goes to a school for the offspring of Dutch parents, does signal the start of a separation.

As the boys progress to the next stage of their education, the narrator's father moves him to a *pension* in Soekaboemi, with the intention that Oeroeg would remain on the plantation. The narrator perceives correctly that 'my father considered my living at Lida's a means to break off my attachment to Oeroeg' (p.44). As we have already seen, Oeroeg's friendship is central to the narrator's sense of belonging to Indonesia, so we must see education here being used as a tool by which the father intends to make his son identify with the Netherlands over Indonesia. This is, in fact, partly successful, in that it weakens the narrator's identification with the country and Oeroeg's family, but fails to weaken the two boys' friendship as Oeroeg remains a constant presence in the narrator's life, eventually moving into Lida's *pension* himself. After a visit to Oeroeg's family, now living in a mountain village, the narrator recalls that 'one year of order and regularity in Lida's spotless house had made us feel an unsuspected inner constraint with regard to the squalor and poverty of the village' (p.51). In comparison to his earlier statement, 'Even in the dilapidated village house [...] I felt more at home than in the hollow dimly lighted rooms of our house' (pp.25-26), this indicates a slight breaking down of the boy's ties to Indonesia, though his ties to Dutch life (his father's house) have become less welcoming too, with the arrival of a step-mother with whom he cannot be friendly. Thus, for now, he is even more dependent on Oeroeg's friendship for his sense of belonging anywhere.

Around this stage, the narrator begins to become aware of the different perceptions other people have of him and Oeroeg, based on their racial and cultural backgrounds. The attitude of his classmates towards Oeroeg make the narrator 'aware, for the first time in my life, that, in the eyes of the others, Oeroeg was a 'native; [...] a village boy, the son of a subordinate employee' (p.39). Though Gerard consoles the narrator that this does not mean that Oeroeg and he cannot be friends and that, no matter what others say, they are equal; this awareness of inequality in the eyes of others challenges the viability, within the social, political and economic context of *Nederlands-Indië*, of a friendship with deep significance to the narrator's identity.

However, the narrator has 'little sensitivity for the colonial situation'⁵ and he does not appear to give the matter too much thought. It is Oeroeg's perceptions of these differences that really challenge the friendship and, therefore, the narrator's sense of belonging to Indonesia. We are told that the attitude of the narrator's classmates discussed in the previous paragraph made Oeroeg withdraw on that afternoon before absenting himself entirely, making it 'the first time that I did not know where he was or what he was doing' (p.40), a significant watershed in the deterioration of the boys' relationship in itself. After some time being further separated by the narrator's placement in a boarding school – another stage in the narrator' father's attempts to promote a Dutch, elitist identity for his son and mercilessly characterised as possessed of 'a barren atmosphere' in which 'no full and positive growth and development could be expected' and 'no real friendship' was to be found (p.55) – it is decided Oeroeg should also attend the school. This coincides with what must be seen as a crisis in Oeroeg's own identity. The narrator recalls:

I had the impression that he was doing his utmost to undo everything that would remind him of the past. He spoke only Dutch now [having previously wanted to speak only Sundanese], and he wore conspicuously Western clothes. He was never on familiar terms with Lida's personnel. He preferred to ignore any allusions to our childhood [...]. (pp58-59)

He and his friends 'persistently strove to imitate Western ways' and Oeroeg begins to pass himself off as being of Indo-European heritage, which the narrator attributes to a very strong 'desire to become assimilated into the world of the Europeans' (p59), presumably because he sees that a student of his talent has more opportunities if they are part of this world. Oeroeg is becoming aware of the limitations placed upon him as a native in *Nederlands-Indië*.⁶

⁵ Maier, 'Escape from the Green and Gloss of Java': 86.

⁶ It is perhaps not surprising that such awareness should develop at a higher level of the education system, or in a specialized area such as Oeroeg's chosen discipline of medicine. While the Dutch had increased access to higher education for the non-European population in the early twentieth century, they still experienced inequality in access to it, in opportunities after graduation, and even in their chances of

At the school, Oeroeg encounters further distance from the boys, all of Dutch descent, and falls into 'a state of withdrawal I had never seen in him at Kebon Djati' (p.66). This includes a withdrawal from his boyhood friend. Their friendship is weakened because Oeroeg realizes he cannot be accepted into the world of the Dutch elite, and 'could not do otherwise than identify me with the European group whose rejection he felt' (pp.66-67). Oeroeg, increasingly estranged from the society in which he finds himself and from Europeans including the narrator, becomes less reliable as a link between the narrator and the country to which he wants to belong.

Oeroeg becomes closer friends with another medical student, Abdullah. This development of a friendship with someone outside the European elite can be linked to his realization that he occupies an inferior social position in the political order that allows the narrator to claim Indonesia as his home. The narrator sees that he 'was looking for a counterbalance for the situation he found at the school' (p.67). The friendship the two young men have shared until now breaks down as a result; when the narrator tries to talk to Oeroeg about this he finds that 'any explanation or expression from either side was impossible' (p.67). Oeroeg's realization of the position assigned to him by the colonial system is deeply damaging to the boys' friendship and coincides with further estrangement between the narrator and his homeland, when he returns to Kebon Djati to find that he can no longer talk to Oeroeg's family as equals (p.69).

The feelings of exclusion that Oeroeg and Abdullah share are, during their time at medical school, forged into fully-articulated Indonesian nationalism. The accelerating estrangement between Oeroeg and the narrator which this brings about can be seen in the decreasing frequency of correspondence between the two (which was never very regular in any case) and Oeroeg's increasing evasiveness in it. Oeroeg has developed an ideology which necessarily rejects the narrator's claim to belong to Indonesia. Oeroeg's adopting the reductive view of the narrator as 'the symbol, the personification of what they were launching an offensive against with all their being' (p.76) is damaging to the narrator's sense of self – this damage being reflected in his confusion on the

obtaining the qualification for which they were studying. This inequality increased as one moved further up the education system. Fischer, Louis, *The Story of Indonesia* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1959): 53.

evening when Oeroeg and Abdullah tell him of their desire for Indonesia to be independent and free of the Dutch – as Oeroeg was for so much of his childhood an integral part of this.

His confusion also reflects his lack of sensitivity to the colonial situation, and his ignorance to the issues surrounding it is also revealed (pp.76-77). This shows his lack of reflection on the system that put him in a position to claim Indonesia as his homeland at all. That it is barely even approached in the narrator's account of his youth up until this point indicates that, actually, he took this system even more for granted than he did Oeroeg's friendship, probably because any questioning of these structures would question his right to be in Indonesia at all. While he says 'the "colonial" way of thinking [...] was alien to me' (p.79) colonial political structures have been the framework within which he has developed his identity. It is fair to say, in fact, that the geographical space of Indonesia is only his home as long as the socio-political framework of *Nederlands-Indië* is maintained there. When Oeroeg and Abdullah challenge this framework, the narrator recognises that 'The separation between their world and mine was complete' (p.78). The narrator leaves for the Netherlands soon after. Their education has separated Oeroeg and him intellectually and geographically, not because of anything in their personalities but because of the pressures exerted on their friendship by colonialism.

On his return to Indonesia after the Second World War, as a military engineer, it would seem the narrator still has not been able to appreciate the possibility that *Nederlands-Indië* and Indonesia are not unconditionally bound together – he 'had not a moment's doubt that these difficulties [those resulting from the declaration of the independent Republic of Indonesia] would be of a temporary nature' (p.79). *Nederlands-Indië* is still deeply engrained in his consciousness, even if he does not realize it. However, his sense of identity is now based almost exclusively on 'a deeply rooted feeling of belonging to the country where I had been born and brought up' (p.79) and his lengthy identification of the landscape, the geographical space, making him feel as though he has returned home. These identifications alone cannot make him belong. The colonial structures which allowed him to call the Indies home have been dismantled by

Indonesian nationalism – The administrator's house in Kebon Djati has been burnt down, erasing the place of Europeans in that landscape. With this final, tenuous emotional link to the geographical space in which he locates home gone, the narrator encounters Oeroeg, fighting with the nationalist army, who insists 'you have no business here' (p.83). The narrator cannot belong to Indonesia any longer; Oeroeg's rejection of him is the final dissolution of their friendship, with all the significance that had for his identity, and a symbolic rejection of his place in an independent Indonesia. The narrator becomes 'a stranger in the land of my birth' (p.85) because belonging is about more than birth, and more than the geographical space.

In the early days of the narrator's childhood, we are shown that he does not represent the Netherlands, but rather has a hybrid identity which means he is not a native Indonesian, but does feel he belongs to Indonesia. The warmth and friendship he finds with Oeroeg and Oeroeg's family, in stark contrast to his own parents' coldness and desire for him to see himself as purely Dutch, has a great influence on this. However, education means Oeroeg becomes increasingly aware of the difference in opportunities between the two and makes him feel excluded by a social stratum which the narrator comes to represent in his mind, severely weakening their friendship and the narrator's ability to feel that he belongs to the country through Oeroeg's acceptance of him. This weakness becomes a crisis when Oeroeg develops a nationalist consciousness, and the narrator's lack of comprehension reveals to what extent he has relied on a socio-political order which he has taken for granted for his sense of belonging, as well as on Oeroeg's friendship. The social changes within Indonesia mean he can no longer belong, and Oeroeg's final and total rejection of him dissolves their friendship and the narrator's ability to identify Indonesia as 'home'. The identification of 'home' requires individual and collective acceptance of one's belonging, and the bitter legacy of colonialism means the narrator can find neither in the place he most desires it.

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