

## Hella Haasse's Oeroeg: A story of white innocence or white privilege

*Oeroeg*, published in 1948, was the debut novel of Dutch author and the so named, 'Grand Old lady van de Nederlandse Literatuur', Hella Haasse.<sup>1</sup> Haasse was born in 1918 in the Dutch East Indies and lived there for most of her life, before going to study at the University of Amsterdam.<sup>2</sup> The book is set in the Dutch East Indies and centres on the friendship between the narrator, the son of a plantation owner, and Oeroeg, a native boy. We see how over time the two become estranged due to political circumstances and the vast differences in their backgrounds. Throughout the book we see the recurring theme of white innocence. Gloria Wekker defines white innocence as, 'a dominant way in which the Dutch think of themselves, as being a small, but just, ethical nation; colour-blind, thus free of racism; as being inherently on the moral and ethical high ground'.<sup>3</sup> In this essay I will analyse the narrator's presentation of his friendship with Oeroeg, paying special attention to his thoughts on appearance, education and status in society. I will discuss whether the narrator is really speaking through the lense of white innocence or whether his thoughts and actions are actually traits of white privilege, the feeling of entitlement due to one's ethnicity.

*Oeroeg* was set in the years leading to and the years following the Second World War in modern day Indonesia. It therefore gives us an interesting insight into the relationships of the Dutch and the natives in the Dutch East Indies colony. Indonesia came under the control of the United Dutch East India Company in 1602 in what was described as an action to, 'protect that state's trade in the Indian Ocean and to assist in the Dutch war of independence from

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<sup>1</sup> "Schrijfster Hella Haasse Overleden", *Nos.Nl*, 2011 <<https://nos.nl/artikel/277368-schrijfster-hella-haasse-overleden.html>> [19 December 2017].

<sup>2</sup> Aleid Truijens, "Hella Haasse", *Literatuurmuseum* <<http://literatuurmuseum.nl/verhalen/hella-haasse/1918-1928>> [18 December 2017].

<sup>3</sup> Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 2 <<https://www.scribd.com/document/305224429/White-Innocence-by-Gloria-Wekker>> [16 December 2017].

Spain'.<sup>4</sup> It was a highly desired region due to its array of spices and crops which were beneficial for trade<sup>5</sup>. The company was dissolved in 1799 and fell under the control of the Dutch Government, leaving behind a debt of 134 million guilders.<sup>6</sup> Indonesia then remained under Dutch control, apart from the duration of the Second World War, until declaring independence on the 17<sup>th</sup> August 1945. The Dutch however, didn't acknowledge independence until 1949.<sup>7</sup>

One key area where we see examples of the narrator's so called 'white innocence' is in his observations of the appearance of Oeroeg. Whilst reflecting back on their early childhood he states, 'But I do recall disliking my freckles, and hating it when my arms turned all red and blistered in the scorching sun, and how envious I was of Oeroeg's dark skin'.<sup>8</sup> This shows his lack of understanding at the real meaning in the differences in skin colour and the privileged lifestyle he has in comparison to the struggles faced by those native to the colony with black skin. In a more general concept Wekker quotes that, 'whiteness is generally seen as so ordinary, so lacking in characteristics, so normal, so devoid of meaning'.<sup>9</sup> The narrator further describes Oeroeg's appearance by describing his eyes as never, 'losing that tense, searching gaze, as though forever listening out for a sound, a signal, that no one but he could hear'.<sup>10</sup> This shows an almost animalistic comparison, which although probably not meant in a negative manner, is not something you would expect the narrator would ever use to describe another white person. It perhaps therefore can be seen as classifying the Dutch living in the colony as being of a higher status than the East Indians. Furthermore when describing the stature of the two boys, the narrator describes Oeroeg as being smaller, yet more muscular

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<sup>4</sup> "Dutch East India Company", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2015 <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dutch-East-India-Company>> [17 December 2017].

<sup>5</sup> Amryr Vandebosch, *The Dutch East Indies*, 3rd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1944), pp. 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Fischer, *The Story Of Indonesia* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1959), p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> Hella Haasse, *The Black Lake* (London: Portobello Books, 2012), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence*, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Hella Haasse, *The Black Lake*, p. 6.

and possessing the, 'confident strength of the half-grown boys and young men in the fields and at the factory'.<sup>11</sup> This matches the popular western opinion of the build of Indonesians with Vandenbosch describing a typical Indonesian as being characterized by, 'smallness of stature, light to dark brown pigmentation, thick, sleek, black hair, broad formation of head, wide nose and thick lips'.<sup>12</sup> Once again, like the animalistic descriptions, I feel when describing the Dutch, the narrator and other Western publications would steer clear of using such stereotypes. It also seems the author is oblivious to the fact that Oeroeg too, would likely enter a similar job role.

Whilst these early descriptions by the narrator may be pardoned as being innocent thoughts due to the young age of the boys during the period he is describing, later on we see examples that may be seen more of an example of white privilege. This comes with the narrators questioning of Oeroeg when he begins dressing in 'western clothes' and stops wearing his Muslim hat. The narrator states that this, 'detracted from his instinctive air of modesty and reserve, which I had always taken to be an innate quality of his'.<sup>13</sup> The narrator appears to be criticizing Oeroeg for his appearance despite him presumably now wearing clothes similar to his. He seems to feel that Oeroeg should not be able to dress in such a manner which may reflect a belief that he is of higher status than Oeroeg. Both white innocence and white privilege play a part in the narrator's interpretation of Oeroeg's appearance.

The education and expected work roles of the two boys in the novel shows further examples of the differences between them and the take the narrator has on this. Whilst discussing his commencement of primary school with his mother, he asks her in reference to Oeroeg, 'Doesn't he have to go to school then?'.<sup>14</sup> At this point he clearly doesn't understand the privileged position he is in to be able to receive an education. Later on we see further

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Amry Vandenbosch, *The Dutch East Indies*, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Hella Haasse, *The Black Lake*, p. 75.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

evidence of this, as when he has a conversation with his mother in which she tells him that Oeroeg will be starting work after primary school and asks him, ‘You do surely understand that don’t you my boy?’.<sup>15</sup> Whilst as with his early thoughts about appearance, we can perhaps categorize these remarks as more of a white innocence due to his younger age, there is a growing sense that the author is deliberately trying to make the narrator seem more naïve than he perhaps is. This may be in order to portray the image that the Dutch were a just and colour-blind nation. The education of natives in the Dutch East Indies was not much of a concern for the colonizers or the Dutch Government with Vandenbosch stating that, ‘the East India Company little concerned itself with education’.<sup>16</sup> The schools attended by natives and Dutch students were generally separate, however some natives of higher status could attend Dutch schools if fees were paid.<sup>17</sup> The native schools were split into first and second class schools; second class schools were for the general population, whereas first class schools were developing people for official job roles. However, neither of these schools taught in the Dutch language, therefore, ‘The door to higher, western education was closed to most of the children’.<sup>18</sup> Vandenbosch also states that, ‘While calling for...the promotion of native education...the provisions of the new act were in general vague’.<sup>19</sup> The evidence shows that although some education was provided, in general it did not open doors for many natives. The providing of some education would lead the Dutch to believe that they stand on a moral high ground, whilst still preventing Natives from getting a good enough education to get into powerful positions.

Later on in the book, the narrator asks Oeroeg if he still plans to go to medical college. This shows the narrator’s assumption that Oeroeg would be able to get into university and a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> Amry Vandenbosch, *The Dutch East Indies*, p. 198.

<sup>17</sup> *A Manual Of Netherlands India (Dutch East Indies)* (London: H.M Stationery Office, 1920), pp. 140-142.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.200.

<sup>19</sup> Amry Vandenbosch, *The Dutch East Indies*, p. 60.

disregard for the struggle those native to the colony would face in receiving a form of higher education. It was very uncommon for non-Dutch to be working in an educated profession with Fischer stating, 'Indonesians in the professions...were not numerous, about a thousand in the entire archipelago'.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the narrator makes the assumption on page 101 that once qualified as a doctor, Oeroeg will be working for the government. He doesn't seem to have an understanding of why Oeroeg has both a dislike for the government and strong nationalist beliefs. Indonesian nationalists at the time wanted independence from the Dutch which later lead to mass armed conflict.<sup>21</sup> The Dutch would often attempt to justify their side of the atrocities as 'police actions'. This attempted justification shows their attempt to show so-called 'white innocence', however it also shows white privilege in the way they think they have the right to perform such acts. Another interesting quote by the narrator which I think perfectly demonstrates Wekker's definition of white innocence being a Dutch belief that they are a just, ethical nation comes when Oeroeg reveals that he would later like to work in America. The narrator states, 'I realised later that he believed - mistakenly, of course - that race and parentage would be of no account for him or anyone else in the New World'.<sup>22</sup> I find it rather ironic that the narrator appears to criticize the new world for showing a prejudice towards non-whites even though the same thoughts were held by the Dutch who ran the plantations in the East Indies. He seems of the opinion that the Dutch mind set was much more advanced than that held in the New World.

In order to fully understand the opinions the Dutch held of the natives of the colony, we must examine the status of the characters in the book. Whilst referring to Oeroeg, the narrator says, 'like most natives'.<sup>23</sup> This shows a grouping together of the whole population and something

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<sup>20</sup> Louis Fischer, *The Story Of Indonesia*, p. 143.

<sup>21</sup> "Indonesian War Of Independence", *New World Encyclopedia*, 2014  
<[http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Indonesian\\_War\\_of\\_Independence](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Indonesian_War_of_Independence)> [16 December 2017].

<sup>22</sup> Hella Haasse, *The Black Lake*, p. 83.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.53.

he probably wouldn't have done when describing the white population. It shows a tendency for these people to be viewed as a collective and not as individuals. This grouping tends to come with stereotypes that are applied to the whole group, such as when Oeroeg is setting up fights between animals whilst he and the narrator played. The narrator explains Oeroeg's actions by saying, 'Oeroeg was not cruel, it was simply that he did not know the feeling Europeans often have of wanting to spare an animal and treat it with respect'.<sup>24</sup> This shows the narrator's belief that Europeans have higher morals, however the narrator doesn't think it is Oeroeg's fault as he believes this is how all natives are and that they do not have the instinctive caring instinct that westerners do. I believe this is a key example of white innocence rather than white privilege as it is engrained in the narrator that the actions of the native population are a part of their less civilized culture.

Throughout the book we see the narrator display an innocent almost childlike naivety when it comes to the difference in class between him and Oeroeg. At one point during his childhood years he asks Gerard, a fellow Dutchman working on the estate, if Oeroeg was any less than them.<sup>25</sup> At another point during the narrator's 11<sup>th</sup> birthday party, in which he has two boys from his school round, one of them refers to Oeroeg with the term 'Ajo', a term that would have only been used towards natives. In spite of the language being used towards Oeroeg being rather derogatory, the narrator claims that it was, 'probably more in fun than with any evil intent'.<sup>26</sup> Despite this justification the author goes on to state, 'I became aware for the first time ever, of Oeroeg being regarded as a 'native''.<sup>27</sup> This mirrors the author, Hella Haasse's view that she only realised the difference between the natives and the Dutch when she first visited the Netherlands.<sup>28</sup> I find both of these statements difficult to believe as there

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.52.

<sup>28</sup> Aleid Truijens, "Hella Haasse", *Literatuurmuseum*.

were clear differences in the treatment of these groups. It seems to me, to instead be more of an attempt by the author to justify the continued colonisation of Indonesia. The Manual of Netherlands India also claims that, 'The Dutch appear to have now a genuine desire to improve native conditions, though their system often bears hardly on the individual'.<sup>29</sup> I think this backs up this point as it shows the Dutch like to act as if they are helping the locals when in reality little may be being done.

Throughout *Oeroeg* we get a clear picture of how, despite the boys attempt at friendship, they are in fact worlds apart. I believe the narrator's opinions often show white innocence, however there are some examples of when this strays into white privilege. White privilege can be defined as, 'an institutional (rather than personal) set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble the people who dominate the powerful positions in our institutions'.<sup>30</sup> One interesting aspect is that we only hear the opinions of the narrator and never of Oeroeg. The author leads us to believe that life for both boys is carefree with Hagestadt stating, 'He describes these early years as a time of Rousseau-esque innocence, spent roaming the jungle foothills and eating pancakes in the servants' quarters'.<sup>31</sup> I also believe that his lack of acknowledgment of the reality and innocent remarks are often used to paint the Dutch plantation owners in a positive light. He does not seem to realise the conditions that the plantation owners have the workers living in. There is almost a sense that their purpose is to help the natives when in reality, 'Colonisation was not the white man's burden as widely claimed by Eurocentric academics; it was the white man's gain'.<sup>32</sup> Despite this I don't think the author can be held completely responsible and it is alternatively more an example of the

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<sup>29</sup> *A Manual Of Netherlands India (Dutch East Indies)*, p. 129.

<sup>30</sup> Francis E. Kendall, *UNDERSTANDING WHITE PRIVILEGE* (Albany, 2002) <<https://www.cpt.org/files/Undoing%20Racism%20-%20Understanding%20White%20Privilege%20-%20Kendall.pdf>> [20 December 2017].

<sup>31</sup> Emma Hagestadt, "The Black Lake, By Hella S Haasse", *Independent*, 2012 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-black-lake-by-hella-s-haasse-8209236.html>> [15 December 2017].

<sup>32</sup> Shaka Yesufu, "White Innocence: Paradoxes Of Colonialism And Race", *Ethnic And Racial Studies*, 41.3 (2017), 613-616 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1339901>>.

common view held, particularly in 1948 when the book was published. Instead I think it shows the difficulty authors face when writing about the colonial period. I believe this book proves that it is challenging to remain impartial and therefore traits of white innocence and white privilege show through in their literature.

White Innocence and White Privilege are both apparent in Hella Haasse's *Oeroeg*. Wekker, on the topic of Dutch innocence suggests that, 'persistently, an innocent, fragile, emancipated white Dutch self is constructed versus a guilty, uncivilized barbaric other'.<sup>33</sup> Whilst I would not go as far as to fully agree with Wekker's account which would suggest white oppression is seen in literature works such as *Oeroeg*, I do feel that the narrator's remarks about the appearance, education and status of Oeroeg show the differences between their groups in society.

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June 2018

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<sup>33</sup> Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence*, p. 15.



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