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Female Passion for the Wrong Man:
Interracial Relationships in a Dutch East Indies Novel¹

Introduction

One of the ways in which the Netherlands finds itself at the crossroads of cultures is in its colonial past and, hence, its contacts with different cultures from other parts of the world. Literary texts provide excellent material to explore how various cultures, values and beliefs, as well as people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, intersect and interconnect. A plethora of stories and novels on the Dutch East Indies are evidence of the extent to which Dutch norms and ideologies found their way to the Indies and were transformed, diverging from those in the Netherlands. Literature about the Dutch East Indies, whether written in Dutch or Malay, represents by its very nature interdiscursivity and intertextuality. One finds amazingly complex interconnections between works of literature, journalistic texts, and even gossip.²

While usually my research on Indies literature concerns texts in Malay (Bahasa Indonesia), this paper concentrates on a novel in Dutch, *Schuim van goud* (1934, Golden Foam, untranslated), and aims to contribute to the larger discussion of gender and race relations in the colonial context. Written in the language of the colonizer, and

therefore speaking in the dominant rather than the subaltern voice in terms of colonial hegemony, the book and the events around its publication reveal taboos with regard to sex, gender, race and class. *Schuim van goud* shocked its audience because it deviated from accepted norms regarding interracial sexual relationships. Taking on a feminist, postcolonial point of view, I start from the premise that the colonial project was gendered and sexualized in nature. Tropes of a feminized Orient, virgin land and forests which were to be conquered and penetrated by European men, or, to quote Ania Loomba, "continents [...] available for plunder, possession, discovery and conquest" (151), have become familiar through feminist and postcolonial studies, as has the image of the emasculated Oriental male (e.g. Said 1978, Spivak 1988, Stoler 1991, McClintock 1995). Power accumulated in the white European male, who in the colony always already belonged to the upper social strata. His race overshadowed his social class: because of his skin colour he took on superiority as soon as he stepped on Indies soil (Taylor 7-9, Gouda 162-3). The same was true of European women (Locher-Scholten 31). In the Indies those of mixed descent, Eurasians (Indos), took up an ambivalent, liminal, in-

between space, as they “ambiguously straddled, crossed and threatened [...] imperial divides” (Stoler 514). On the one hand their hybridity granted them privileges reserved for the Europeans, but on the other hand they were able to shift identities constantly, to move in and out of either European or Indonesian worlds (McClintock 317).

Gender, race and class were closely interlocked elements in determining power relations. If one of these components was missing, white male prestige was threatened. Their linkage is apparent in patterns of interracial sexual liaisons and marriages, which were common in the Indies. From the early seventeenth century onwards Dutch men took Asian women as their companions, either as legitimate wives or as so-called ‘nyais’ (house-keepers / bed partners).³ However, interracial relationships were only accepted in so far as they followed prescribed gender/race/class patterns. Over the centuries it became acceptable for a European male to be sexually involved with an Asian female housekeeper/employee, whether native Indonesian,⁴ Chinese or Eurasian (Taylor 1983, Locher-Scholten 2000, Ming 1983, Hellwig 1994). In contrast, it was considered unsuitable for a European woman to have a sexual (marital) relationship with an Asian man, and a scenario in which a European female would have sex with an Asian male whom she employed was altogether unimaginable. Such relationships bordered on perversity (Gouda 168).

Schuim van goud. Indische zedenroman (Golden Foam, Indies novel of morals, untranslated) by J. Treffers (1883-1945) presents its readers with a sexual

relationship between an Indo woman of European standing and an Indonesian male. It was published in 1934 by G. Kolff & co., a well-established and respected publisher in Batavia. Earlier in the same year Kolff had published *Slagschaduwen* (Shadows Cast) by Treffers. This novel was received positively even though its content was perceived as controversial among its Indies readers (van den Berg 222). The narrative does not shy away from descriptions of a debauched Batavian society totally gone astray. In *Slagschaduwen* the reader follows a young Dutch woman Mientje, who is a sent-for paper bride (*met de handschoen getrouwd*) to Dick Dammers in the Indies. Fresh from the Netherlands, she arrives in Batavia only to become completely disillusioned by her husband and his friends with their morally degenerate lives full of sexual innuendos and extramarital lechery.

Schuim van goud turned out to be even more contentious than *Slagschaduwen*, and the lot that fell to this book was more drastic. The novel had only been out on the market for a few weeks when the publisher decided to withdraw it. It was never officially banned, but the withdrawal was probably the result of an unofficial arrangement between the Department of Justice and the publisher (van den Berg 219, Treffers 7). Some people whose opinions were widely respected rated the novel as pornographic and therefore not suitable for circulation. At the same time as *Schuim van goud* was taken off the market, the author’s wife, known only as Mrs. Treffers, lost her job as a teacher with the prestigious Carpentier Alting Foundation. Whether her dismissal was related to her husband’s book publication or not is unclear (van den Berg 221, Treffers 8). It took more than half a

century before *Schuim van goud* was reprinted in 1990, through the efforts of Joop van den Berg, as part of the revival of interest in Indies literature. It did not receive much attention at the time. In his introduction (Treffers 5-16) van den Berg informs us that Treffers worked in education in the Netherlands, and made his literary debut in 1923. He published two novels and five books for young adults before he moved to the Indies. Snoek discusses Treffers' work as a literary critic in the Indies weekly *d'Orient*, and compares it to Du Perron's book reviews. Between July 1933 and March 1935 Treffers reviewed a book every week, mostly Dutch novels, but also works in English (including Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*), German and French.

Gender and Race Relations in The Novel

The protagonist in *Schuim van goud* is sixteen-year old Ria Van Henegouwen, an only child of a *totok* (pure European-Dutch) father and an Indo (Eurasian) mother. She lives through the typical ups and downs of adolescence while attending the HBS high school in Batavia. With a group of friends she hangs around in the swimming pool and goes dancing on Saturday nights. Ria's father is hardly ever at home, spending most of his time on the road as a commercial traveller, while her mother does not pay her daughter much attention, preferring to dine out with male friends and leaving Ria to herself during the evenings, while in the morning she gets up too late for breakfast together. As a result Ria does not have much of a family life or parental guidance. She often eats her meals alone, which is generally considered the epitome of familial/maternal neglect. The picture that is

created is one of a family materially well-off but emotionally dysfunctional, where husband, wife and daughter are left to their own devices. The practical side of the household is run smoothly by Indonesian servants. Clearly, the licentious Indo mother is to be blamed for this situation, not taking her domestic responsibilities as a housewife and mother seriously. The absence of the father, who is travelling to earn a living, is fully justifiable. When he returns from his business trips, he longs for and expects a Dutch home life, and his wife and daughter force themselves to create a "cozy" (*gezellig, genoegeijk, knus*) atmosphere (Treffers 69-70, 73-4).

Ria and her boyfriend and fellow classmate Theo discover and experiment with their awakening sexualities. Their first night together, in Ria's room, they passionately start their fondling, when a knock on the door interrupts their foreplay. No one is there, but the momentum is gone. Theo leaves Ria, who is half-regretful, half-relieved. The next morning the *kebon* (the Indonesian gardener) hands Ria Theo's badge from the swimming club, indicating that he knows of the nocturnal visit, that he was the *kebon* who disrupted the intimate encounter. After the suspended sexual-romantic event Theo replaces Ria with a new girlfriend. In her distress Ria turns to find comfort with the somewhat older Peter. Frustrated by Theo's rejection and also because she is reprimanded by her father, she secretly starts to observe the *kebon* bathing at the well. She realizes that watching him naked is sexually titillating (Treffers 105-108).

Ria's experiences of sexual desire now

lead her into two separate spheres. While school and her teenage friends make up the public realm of her emotional life, at home Ria creates a space where she can undergo the illicit and unmentionable sensuality with the *kebon*. Peter, Theo and her classmate Erik are acknowledged parts of her life at school, the swimming pool, and the dance parties. However, the clandestine game she plays with the *kebon* is totally private and hidden from the outside world. With scopophilic pleasure Ria watches the naked male body of the Indonesian servant time and again. Knowing that he is aware of her voyeurism, the act of looking becomes increasingly loaded with eroticism. Initially Ria keeps the *kebon* at arm's length: she is the one who dictates the terms of their relationship. In the hierarchy of power, she is clearly superior in terms of class (as the employer's daughter) and race (Eurasian with European standing).

Her attitude is changed by a string of events. First, Peter abandons her for another girlfriend (199). Then, casual petting with Erik turns nasty and almost ends in rape, and Erik angrily calls Ria a whore before he leaves her (207). Lastly, in another effort to win Theo back, Ria sets up a date, but has to swallow the ultimate humiliation when he rejects her because of what Erik has told him (221). For arriving late at school after this upsetting experience, the principal takes disciplinary action against her. Frustrated and full of unreleased energy, she decides to peer from her window at the *kebon*, who up to that moment willingly served as the object of her gaze and sexual desire. This time Ria behaves more invitingly, and as a result the *kebon* abandons his passive role. He enters Ria's room and reaches out for her body.⁵ Ria allows him to touch and arouse her. She

surrenders to physical pleasure, suppressing thoughts of Theo and the others. "In full consciousness she enjoyed the game of lovemaking".⁶

When Ria realizes that her actions have resulted in pregnancy, she becomes obsessed by images of a squalling, crying "little brown creature" (*klein bruin mormel*, 253; *dat eeuwig schreeuwende, bruine monstertje*, 260). In her mind she sees "tiny hands" (245) which hold on to her and never let go. The skin colour of this imagined baby is strikingly present in Ria's mind. It points to a keen awareness of having transgressed not only sexual morality, but even worse, racial boundaries. Still she does not mention her fears to anyone.

Ria's mother expresses serious concern about her daughter's vomiting and fainting. In their conversations the words for 'pregnant', 'pregnancy' or 'expecting' are never used, as they represent the unspeakable. Yet once Mrs. Van Henegouwen knows the truth (even though Ria never discloses who fathered the child), her first priority is to avoid the scandal of an illegitimate child. Taking Ria on a retreat to a small mountain village, she calls on an Indonesian woman for an illegal abortion. As an *Indo* mother she has easy access to the indigenous practices of Indonesians. A bitter potion results in the desired miscarriage. Ria recovers, and her mother feels triumphant at having saved the family's reputation. In order to contain the family secret and also to correct Ria's immoral behaviour, Ria's father sends his daughter to the Netherlands. A month later Ria embarks on the *Marnix*. The closing scene shows Ria, shameless and without regret, flirting with the attractive doctor on duty, and smilingly looking

forward to the future (285).

This closing scene strongly resembles the ending of another novel, *Warm Bloed* (Hot Blood, untranslated, 1904) by Elisabeth Overduyn-Heyligers. Here the Indo protagonist, the married woman Diana De Kanter, has a long-felt secret passion for her Javanese coachman, Soerô, which results in a one-time fling (see Hellwig 1997). Diana, too, travels to the Netherlands – still married – and on board meets a fellow passenger who becomes her new love interest. The Indo women Ria Van Henegouwen and Diana De Kanter are both portrayed as nymphomaniacs who flout sexual morality. With their unrestrained libidos, they transgress a whole range of taboos along the sex/gender/race/class axis.

In the 1930s *Schuim van goud* was branded pornographic, probably because of Ria's voyeuristic pleasure and the sexual exaltation she experiences with the lowly ranked Indonesian *kebon*.⁹ Even though the text is unambiguous about this young woman's sex drive, it never describes the sex acts in an explicitly pornographic way. I fully agree with Joop Van Den Berg that what was at stake when *Schuim van goud* was taken off the market, was first and foremost social, racial and economic disruption (229, 230).

To analyze more closely what constituted the social order, one is tempted to disentangle the four elements: sex, gender, race and class. This, however, proves to be impossible. It is precisely their interconnectedness that guaranteed the power balance in favour of the European male. As mentioned above, it was fully

condoned, in some cases even encouraged, for European men to engage sexually with women whose racial status (Asian) and social class were considered lower: housekeepers, servants, village women. In line with patriarchal thinking women were defined as sexual objects, and were denied agency, subjectivity, and female sexuality on their own terms. The ideal woman was chaste and receptive, virginal before marriage, and monogamous and faithful to her husband/bed partner after it. Ideal femininity meant, not to take the initiative, not to be forward, let alone aggressive, but instead to be passive, prudish and restrained. With regard to race/class, in the Dutch East Indies Indonesians were expected to be employed by Europeans, never the reverse. Indonesians – men and women – were subordinate to Europeans, economically and socially.

To safeguard the colonial order individuals had to comply with society's expectations. Devaluations would upset the stability of social forces. Ria Van Henegouwen and Diana De Kanter are women of European stature, but still Indos, able to move in the interstices of society. They dare to transgress a range of taboos by engaging in sex with an Indonesian male servant. The women themselves realize that their actions are condemned, that they have done the unspeakable. Ria never mentions who made her pregnant (246). Diana has great difficulty in confessing her passion for her Javanese coachman to anyone (Overduyn-Heyligers 219). In his commentary on *Schuim van goud*, van den Berg makes an intertextual connection with a passage in Bas Veth's *Het Leven in Nederlands-Indië*, which mentions "the *kebon* at the well".¹⁰

Apparently certain people believed that native male underlings exerted an irresistible attraction on Indo women. This cliché can be interpreted as an expression of dark fear on the part of European males that their Oriental counterparts were not as effeminate as their white superiors wished them to be. It typically denotes the colonizers' sense of insecurity that Indonesians could pose a threat to their comfortable position of imperium.

Other taboos

While Ria's behaviour provides sufficient reason to upset European male superiority, the novel touches upon another factor which one might call heterosexual male prostitution. After her first sexual experience Ria faces an unexpected anticlimax: the *kebon* requests money. He wants to be paid for his sexual services. He finds fifty cents insufficient, and afraid that he will throw a tantrum, Ria gives him fifty more cents.¹¹ All five times the *kebon* and Ria have sex, he demands payment. When Ria collapses under the financial pressure, the *kebon* comments that "the *nyonya*" (Mrs) has money. Unable to resist the carnal temptation, Ria steals two guilders from her mother's wallet in order to pay the *kebon* two more times.

This situation signifies an interesting additional gender role reversal while leaving the race and class power division intact. The *kebon* sells sex and requires a cash transaction, in the same way female prostitutes demand money for their sex acts. It underscores the fact that he uses his position as an Indonesian male servant to find access to the economic power of Europeans. The well-to-do European, in this

case, is the daughter of the house; the *kebon* accentuates Ria's racial ranking in the colonial hierarchy. Fully aware of the race and class divisions, he uses his male sexuality to overturn gender expectations. The message is that for him sex is not physical pleasure or eroticism, but marketable and to be commodified in a capitalist economy. Male heterosexual prostitution undermines a social order where men are financially in power, expected to pay for sex rather than to be paid.

Last but not least, the novel and its author challenge another taboo. We have seen that in 1934 Mrs. Treffers lost her job as a teacher. She passed away in 1937.¹² J. Treffers was a teacher, too, and in 1938 he taught at the private Marnix College in Sindanglaya. In December of that year a scandal around male homosexuality became the focus of police and media attention on Java, Bali and other islands (Kerkhof 1982, 1992). The authorities branded such behaviour a major act of indecency and fornication, directly related to male prostitution. Some two hundred and twenty men of all social and racial layers of the Indies were targeted. J. Treffers was one of the first to be arrested in this notorious round-up (Kerkhof 1982: 37, 1992: 94). As a school teacher he already had a record of sexually assaulting underage boys in the Netherlands, and even spent time in prison. On Java he had earlier been removed from the Queen Wilhelmina School in Batavia for the same reasons.¹³ The publicity around these gay men, however, died down when the Second World War broke out in Europe. According to Kerkhof, it did not have a lasting effect on the Indies, it was no more than "a colonial incident, even though very typical," but for those involved it was a sad

period with far-reaching results (1992: 112). There seems to be no information on what happened to Treffers after his arrest and later in life. Apparently he died on July 7, 1945 during the Japanese occupation of the Indies (van den Berg 1988: 220).¹⁴

This interesting knowledge of the author's sexual orientation, which he carefully hid behind his marriage and family life, helps us to understand this particular novel in a different way. Knowing that Treffers was attracted to young (Indonesian) men influences one's reading of Ria's observations of the *kebon*. It explains why this male author chose an Indonesian man as the love interest and object of desire in the novel. However, conventional morality forced him to make a woman the desiring subject with agency. He may also have felt he had to choose a teenage protagonist in order not to upset age boundaries, for while one commonly finds older men sexually involved with younger women, the opposite is yet another taboo. Treffers's own passion for young men also clarifies why his use of stream of consciousness and particular choice of words give the reader a sense of immediacy. The author possibly imparts very personal experience through Ria, perhaps even including the aspect of male prostitution, which was allegedly a shocking part of the scandal (Kerkhof 1992: 95). Ria's female gaze on the masculine body and her scopophilic pleasure can be read as the author's sublimation of his own sexual desires:

He [the *kebon*] had pulled up his already short pants well up above the knees... which revealed his strong muscular thighs. He was a robust fellow if you

saw him lying like that and she couldn't help gazing at him with pleasure (25).¹⁵

Mockingly she looked at his naked back and the short tight pants that veiled nothing. 'A sturdy lad' she thought again (26).

His skin was matt brown and his limbs were almost perfect. He was hefty and sturdy for a Native, she had often admired the muscularity of his arms. His hair frizzled black; without his disfiguring headgear he had an attractive face (106).

In all probability Treffers projected his own physical excitement onto his female character. Ria's devouring sexual libido was considered un-womanly, and *Schuim van goud* had to be taken off the market for its immoral content: it subverted notions of sexual, social and racial propriety. Had the sexes been reversed, had Ria been a man with the same sexual appetite for a woman, no one would have questioned it at the time. However, had Ria been a European man, and had the novel openly addressed interracial homoeroticism, something Treffers lived with but could not publicly express, it would no doubt have caused an enormous uproar with much further-reaching consequences than a quiet withdrawal of the novel.

Considering his married life, detention in the Netherlands and his 1938 arrest on Java, we can conclude that J. Treffers was a closeted gay male. He wrote *Schuim van goud*, which readers today can interpret as an outlet for his own sexual desires. In order to circumvent one of the many unspeakable taboos which existed in public Dutch

discourse – homosexuality – he had to disguise male same-sex desire in the figure of a woman. He may not have foreseen that, even within the perimeters of heterosexual passion, he could be an iconoclast. Because of its controversial content *Schuim van goud* offers the readers an interesting insight into Indies society. Its withdrawal from the market underscores the fact that power and superiority were in the hands of, and defined by, the white heterosexual male. The novel is an intricate revelation of the complexity of the colonial society, and what was sacrosanct in terms of sex, gender, race and class.

NOTES

¹ I dedicate this paper to Joop van den Berg, who rescued *Schuim van goud* from oblivion.

² Siegel (1997: 24-26) refers to Malay stories which take gossip as their sources. In two case studies (Hellwig 2001, 2002) I have demonstrated how intertextuality manifests itself.

³ Referring to a roll call in 1618, Taylor writes: “Already the Dutch were showing characteristics that were to be enduring features of their settlements in Asia [...]: they [...] took concubines from among the local women” (1-2).

⁴ I use the word ‘Indonesian’ to refer to anyone who, or anything which, originates from the geographical region that is now Indonesia, even though Indonesia as a political entity did not exist in the period under discussion.

⁵ Een zekere gedecideerdheid kenmerkte nu zijn handelingen (Treffers 224).

⁶ In volle bewustheid genoot ze het spel der liefde (*ibid.*).

⁷ [...] ze kende vrees noch schaamte (Treffers 226).

⁸ En ten tweede male voerde hij haar naar de verrukkingen van de volkomen bevrediging (Treffers 233). Opnieuw onderging ze de bevrediging van haar lijfelijke begeerte als een voldoening (Treffers 234).

⁹ This response to *Schuim van goud* brings to mind how D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was received by his reading public. The latter novel challenged class/gender boundaries without any reference to race.

¹⁰ En hij [Bas Veth] neemt vervolgens de lezer mee naar het grote Indische achtererf waar juist de tuinjongen aan het baden is (van den Berg 217; see also 218).

¹¹ “Verzoeken geld!”
Nu was ze weer gansch bij zinnen. Geld? Waarvoor? [...] Ze stond op, bang dat hij een spektakel zou maken, haalde haar beursje en gaf hem twee kwartjes.
“Niet genoeg.”
Als een roofdier stond hij voor haar. Ze gaf hem nog twee kwartjes er bij (Treffers 225).

¹² Information given by Joop van den Berg, personal communication.

¹³ “T. was in Nederland ook al werkzaam geweest bij het onderwijs en veroordeeld wegens contact met minderjarige jongens. Na zijn gevangenisstraf uitgezeten te

hebben, vertrok hij naar Indië, waar hij leraar werd aan de Koningin Wilhelmina School te Batavia. Ook daar "vergreep" hij zich herhaaldelijk aan de leerlingen der school" (Kerkhof 1982: 37).

¹⁴ Joop van den Berg does not refer to Treffers's homosexuality. Even though there were some indications, he had no evidence at the time, and did not want to pursue it. Moreover, when he met Treffers's daughter in the late 1980s, she explicitly expressed her wish not to speak about "nasty things from the past." (personal communication)

¹⁵ Zijn toch al korte broek had hij tot ver over de knieën opgetrokken ... waardoor zijn stevige, gespierde bovenbenen zichtbaar waren. Het was een forsche vent, als je hem zoo zag liggen en ze kon niet nalaten hem even met welgevallen te bekijken (Treffers 25).

Spottend keek ze naar zijn blooten rug en het korte, spannende broekje dat niets verhulde. 'Een stevige knaap' dacht ze nogmaals (Treffers 26).

Dofbruin was zijn huid en zijn ledematen grensden aan het volmaakte. Hij was groot en fors voor een Inlander; de gespierdheid van zijn armen had ze al dikwijls bewonderd. Zwart kroesde zijn haar; zonder het ontsierend hoofddekseel had hij een knap gezicht (Treffers 106).

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