Question #7

Max Havelaar by Multatuli (or Edward Douwes Dekker) is a complex book that deals with 19th century Dutch-colonialism in Indonesia. Historically, the novel has been received anti-colonially, and readers have pointed out the many ways it criticizes Indonesian subjugation. More recently, critics have called this perspective into doubt by exposing pro-colonialist sentiment in the main character of Havelaar and the life of Dekker. In this essay, I will examine *Max Havelaar* from both viewpoints, insisting it can be read as an anti-colonialist novel without ignoring its pro-colonialist features. I will first discuss the different ways both Havelaar (the character) and the historic Dekker embody a desire for colonial power rather than Indonesian liberation. This will then be compared against the interjection of Multatuli, *the character* – a figure I see as separate from Havelaar and Dekker – who is unveiled at the end of the novel with a strong anti-colonialist fervor.

Throughout the novel, Max Havelaar embodies pro-colonialist sentiment via his desire for power. By obtaining more control over the native society, Havelaar believes he could "correctly" rule the Javanese people and protect them "against extortion and oppression" (Multatuli 118). More often than not, this mission turns paternalistic and condescending. For instance, Havelaar upholds that the greatest threat to the Javanese is their *own* Regent, a figure he regularly blames for all of the society's injustices. In other words, Havelaar thinks it is his duty to protect them from themselves. At the same time, this concern is embedded in the fact that the Regent has more tangible power *than him* (and Assistant-Residents in general) – he adds, it is "the *inferior* [Regent] [who] commands the *superior* [Assistant-Resident]" (Multatuli 80). By further positioning himself as "superior" to the Javanese, Havelaar ultimately justifies his search for power and colonial rule in general.

Whenever Havelaar condemns the Dutch colonialist empire, it ultimately is rooted in this so-called "Regent problem" (rather than "the colonial problem"). According to Havelaar, colonial Generals and Residents have failed specifically because they allow Regents to get away with too much. They turn a blind eye to the practices of the Regent in order to keep peace on the level of colonial output. Thus, as Darren C. Zook says, the problem for Havelaar is not that the "empire […] had gone too far," but rather that it "had not gone far enough" (1174). In essence, Havelaar is calling for colonial *reform* rather than abolishment; and of course, this reform can only "correctly" come about if he has more control than the Regent.

The life of Eduard Douwes Dekker seems to correspond with much of Havelaar's journey and desire for colonial power. Dekker – who served as an Assistant-Resident in Lebak – gave up working for the Dutch colonial state after being unable to reform the system's power-dynamics; Regents still had more de facto power than Assistant-Residents, and it wasn't changing. In response to this "injustice" (or bruise to his pride), Dekker inevitably decided to start writing *Max Havelaar*. By the time it was prepared to be published, Zook notably points out that Dekker told colonial officials he would terminate the work if he received "a generous promotion in rank (first to Resident, then to Councilor of the Indies), a considerable amount of money, and a prestigious medal recognizing his service, among other things" (1172). Dekker's chase for power in the colonial system was seemingly endless, and his status as an anti-colonialist individual should rightly be challenged.

Nevertheless, *Max Havelaar* as a novel is greater than the characterization of Havelaar and the life of Dekker. Its end contains a strong anti-colonialist call to action via the unveiling of Multatuli *the character*. As a character, Multatuli's final speech can be

perceived separately from Havelaar and Dekker. When Multatuli speaks, he becomes a persona whose voice is bigger than any autobiographical self. Importantly, even the repetition of the name Multatuli ("I have suffered greatly") in this passage carries a strong meaning for all of its readers. Limitless "sufferers" who read the final passage can take up the speaker-narrator's subject position as a sufferer and activist (including Indonesian readers who have experienced injustice under colonial rule). Once the position is taken up, these readers become the "I" in statements such as "I will make my weapons as strong and sharp as necessary;" "I would sling sword-whetting war songs into the hearts of the poor martyrs to whom I promised my aid;" "I will be heard;" and more (Multatuli 368). Even without clearly spelling out a call for abolishment, this passage can clearly be interpreted under a fierce anti-colonialist spirit.

Interestingly, in the final scene, Multatuli (as a character) also dissociates from Havelaar. He exclaims, "I am no poetical sparer of flies, no mild-mannered dreamer *like the downtrodden Havelaar*" (368, my italics). While critics such as Zook are quick to conflate Havelaar, Multatuli (the character), and the historical Dekker, this statement reveals a perceivable level of incongruity between them. As I have argued, Multatuli's speech can thus operate with a level of independence. Readers who rightfully find Havelaar as power-hungry or Dekker as too pro-colonialist can, in the end, still identity with an anti-colonialist messaging.

Identifying with *Max Havelaar* from an anti-colonialist perspective is not new. As Anne-Marie Feenberg notes, "the novel had an important influence on Sukarno and other leaders of the nationalist liberation movement, which led [Indonesia] to independence in 1945" (820-821). In my reading of *Max Havelaar*, I have read in accordance with this anti-

colonialist spirit, demonstrating how pro-colonialist aspects of both Havelaar and the author's life do not control how the novel must be received. Though I believe Havelaar and Edward Dower Dekker ultimately embody a desire for more colonial power via "reform," the message given by Multatuli in the end of the novel allows identification with the sufferer-activist subject position – an emotional position that not only invites anti-colonialist sentiment, but simultaneously invokes real revolutionary action against Dutch imperialism.

Works Cited

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