**Question #7**

*Choose one of the questions below. Please illustrate you answer with at least two references to the text*

*7. Max Havelaar has traditionally been interpreted as a fierce critique on the (Dutch) colonial system and hence, it can be considered as an early example of the postcolonial perspective on literature. More recently, however, some scholars cast doubt on or object to this classical, canonical reading. Darren C. Zook, for instance, argues that ‘Multatuli and Max Havelaar collectively represent not an anti-colonial voice at all but rather an exhortation for a reformed and strengthened empire’ (Zook 2006). What position would you defend in this debate?*

**Reading Notes**

* 82 – “The European official leads a bourgeois existence; the native chief lives—or is assumed to live—like royalty”
  + This sentiment – along with the description of the chiefs lifestyle that follows – seems to suggest that the people suffer based upon the greed of their chief
  + The chief receives the blame for selling out his people
* 88 – “it is nevertheless *very* rare for a regent to be charged with despotism or abuse of power”
  + The problem is the fact that Regents aren’t held accountable (according to Havelaar)… But isn’t the root of the problem the exploitation of Indonesian people via colonialism? This is something that is briefly acknowledged on page 83: “But then strangers came from the West, taking possession of the land” but it isn’t strictly condemned.
* Max’s strange celebration of poverty seems disrespectful knowing that some of these mothers are eating their own children to stay alive.
* 118 – Implied within Max’s statement that he will “protect the native population against extortion and oppression” is the idea of making the native Regent more honest. This falls in line with his speech to the Regent and other chiefs (“But if there should happen to be in our midst some who neglect their duties for gain, who sell justice for money, who seize the poor man’s buffalo, and the fruits that belong to the hungry . . . who is to punish them?” – Page 139).
* Compare the above point with Max’s statements to Verbrugge about paying the Regent early.
* 131 – I find Max’s portrayal as an “apostle” or “seer” somewhat sycophantic (also page 148); Max is not a martyr who suffers like the indigenous people suffer
* I find Drystubble’s (satirical) passages about the church and colonialism to be quite critical. Could use this as a counter-perspective.
* Footnote 76 is a good one to look at for Multatuli’s explicit disdain for the Dutch government.
* Alongside corruption of Regent, Havelaar is upset with corruption of Dutch officials – not so much in the injustice of colonialism in general, but the way it is *practiced* via officials who are more worried about their futures, reputations, and images
  + Emphasized in story of predecessor who is suspended by General (starting on page 225)
* Note 94: “Dutchmen, be warned: our rivals are lying in wait. What is more, the governors- general are, in this respect, less guilty of wholesale neglect than future historians may suppose. Instead of putting their energy into keeping Insulindia intact, they have to focus on maintaining their authority in the face of ministers, parliamentary gossip, and incompetent Dutch newspaper scribblers.”
* 235 – “abhors unpaid labour” … The problem is that it is *unpaid* according to Havelaar… Maybe it just shouldn’t be there?
* Some level of support for using “chain gangs” to help garden around his house. Implied that he supports the Netherlands’ involvement in Indonesian society (even as a judge) but it thoroughly upset with how this happens in practice… wants to REFORM the system (footnote 97)
* Starting on 243 – discussion on how Dutch officials are too worried about their reputations; they don’t want to let the government know if things aren’t going as smoothly as possible, so they lie about it
* 243 – Discussion of India. The problem (for Havelaar) is that corruption by officials led to terrible conditions for the people and then a huge revolt. Havelaar is therefore saying that the government needs to think more about its Indonesian “subjects” (but isn’t explicitly saying that the Netherlands should leave).
* Is there a balance between being able to recognize the good the book does (in that it draws awareness to the horrible conditions many Indonesian people suffered through) while also recognizing that it isn’t completely calling for the dismantling of this colonization?
* Footnote 104 is important
* 272 – Governor’s Disease
* 282 – call for people who discriminate based on skin-color to stop and see “beating heart under thar dark skin” … facetiously displaying their lack of empathy on 283
* 288/289 – Drystubble showing the greed of colonialism
* Multatuli’s statement at the end is compelling… on the one hand, he clearly acknowledges that the people of Indonesia are certainly taken advantage of via colonialism. They are stolen from. In his call to the King, he does acknowledge them as people of the Dutch realm though, not 100% calling for their complete independence.
* Cannot conflate Havelaar and Multatuli though. Multatuli (even as a character) is specifically not Havelaar

Question #7

*Max Havelaar* by Multatuli 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, this perspective has been called into doubt. In his essay, “Searching for Max Havelaar: Multatuli, Colonial History, and the Confusion of Empire,” Darren C. Zook’s focuses on the colonialist characteristics of Max Havelaar (the character) and Multatuli (the author, Edward Douwes Dekker), questioning whether they actually call for the abolishment of colonialist rule. In agreement with Zook, I support his characterization of these two figures. Nevertheless, I do not read *Max Havelaar* as a pro-colonialist novel. In my reading, the impact of Multatuli *the character*, who is unveiled at the end of the novel, reveals a strong anti-colonialist fervor that invites readers to take up the the subject position of an enraged sufferer*.* In this essay, I will briefly look at the different ways Max Havelaar (the character) and Edward Douwes Dekker show obvious pro-colonialist tendencies that must be acknowledged. This will then be compared with Multatuli *the character*, who, when separated from the author’s historical life, becomes a revolutionary persona that invites genuine anti-colonialist sentiment. As support for my analysis, I will also look at the anti-colonialist reading many Indonesian revolutionaries attributed to *Max Havelaar* as they fought for independence in the 20th century.

Throughout the novel, Max Havelaar portrays pro-colonialist sentiment via his strong desire for power within the colonialist system. By obtaining power over the native society, Havelaar believes he can “correctly” rule the Javanese people and protect them “against extortion and oppression” (118). More often than not, this mission turns paternalistic and condescending. For instance, the gravest threat Havelaar perceives to the Javanese people is the power of their *own* Regent; in other words, he thinks it is his duty to protect them from themselves. However, one conspicuous feature of the Regents is their de facto power *over* Assistant-Residents – a reality that extremely frustrates Havelaar. In light of this, Havelaar suggest that the primary cause of injustice in the native society is the Regent’s power – “the *inferior* [Regent] commands the *superior* [Assistant-Resident]” (80) and – according to Havelaar – it should be the other way around.

Furthermore, Havelaar’s inditement of the Dutch colonialist empire ultimately revolves around “the Regent problem” rather than “the colonial problem.” According to Havelaar, the colonial Generals and Residents are guilty of allowing Regents to get away with too much. They turn a blind eye to unethical practices of the Regent in order to keep peace on the level of colonial output. Thus, as 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). Havelaar is ultimately calling for colonial *reform* rather than abolishment. Of course, this reform can only “correctly” come about if gains complete power over the Regent and Javanese people in general.

The life of Multatuli (the author, Eduard Douwes Dekker ) seems to correspond with much of Havelaar’s desire for colonial power. Dekker – who served as an Assistant-Resident in Lebak, gave up working for the Dutch colonial state after being refused power over Lebak’s Regent (the feature of colonial reform Havelaar also thinks is necessary). In response to this “injustice” done *towards him*, Dekker chose to write *Max Havelaar*. Notably, Zook points out that when *Max Havelaar* was prepared to be published, 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 called into question.

Yet, the end of the novel contains a strong anti-colonialist call to action via the unveiling of Multatuli *the character*. In my opinion, the final statements by the character Multatuli, emphatically cannot be conflated with the historical Edward Dower Dekker. Multatuli becomes a persona whose voice is bigger than any autobiographical self. Readers (hypothetically, even the historical Dekker) can relate or disassociate from him. Those who relate to him are further hailed by the use of Multatuli and its meaning (“I have suffered greatly”) in itself. Limitless “sufferers” who read this passage will take up the speaker-narrator’s subject position. Certainly included in this are the Indonesian readers who have suffered under colonial rule. Once they take up the position, 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. And this emotional call to action against Dutch rule – whether it specifically spells out the abolishment of it or not – becomes anti-colonialist for sufferers who are ready to revolt.

While Zook rightfully characterizes Havelaar (the character) and Multatuli (the author, Edward Dower Dekker) as colonialist voices, he is quick to conflate the author with the sentiment of both Havelaar and Multatuli the character. Yet in the final pages of the novel, Multatuli the character specifically dissociates for Havelaar. He says, “I am no poetical sparer of flies, no mild-mannered dreamer *like the downtrodden Havelaar*” (368, my italics). This further supports my belief that Multatuli’s feverous cry at the end of the novel can be separated from Havelaar and Dekker, leaving open the novel’s categorization as an anti-colonialist novel.

In addition, looking at how the novel was received by the Indonesian community plays a vital role in how the novel should be remember.

Max Havelaar (the character) and Multatuli (the author, Edward Dower Dekker) are emphatically not *Max Havelaar* the novel. While the former two figures can be characterized as colonialists, *Max Havelaar* does not necessarily need to be. By looking at the final cry of Multatuli the character, I believe that this novel can be labeled Anti-colonialist.

Alongside this, it is crucial to acknowledge the real anti-colonialist impact the novel served during the Indonesian revolt against Dutch colonialism. As Anne-Marie Feenberg states, “[Max Havelaar] had an important influence on Sukarno and other leaders of the nationalist liberation movement, which led [Indonesia] to independence in 1945” (820-821). And, as Termorshuizen and Snoek note, “[Multatuli] was seen by many young Indonesians and presented in nationalist speeches and writings” as a “natural supporter in the struggle for national independence” (qtd. in Feenberg 821). Whether Indonesian revolutionaries read Havelaar similarly to my reading or not, the anti-colonial labeling should be remembered it is contemporary reception. As I have attempted to show, this does not mean colonialist attitudes or characterizations in the novel must be ignored; both can be acknowledged in its reception