

Constructing Masculinity in the Colonial East Indies: Literary Depictions of Javanese and European Men in E. Douwes Dekker's *Max Havelaar* and Louis Couperus' *The Hidden Force*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways masculinities are represented in two literary works published during the Dutch colonial period in the East Indies, the former name of Indonesia under Dutch colonisation. The works are Max Havelaar by E. Douwes Dekker, or Multatuli, and The Hidden Force by Louis Couperus. This article aims to show how colonial literary texts construct different forms of masculinity through unequal relations between European and native male characters. Using qualitative textual analysis, this article closely reads Dutch and native protagonists in relation to colonial discourse, gendered authority, and cultural hierarchy. The theoretical framework is based on Edwin Ardener's concept of muting gender, which explains how certain gendered expressions are silenced, obscured, or rendered less visible within dominant structures of representation. The analysis shows that the forms of masculinities embodied by the Dutch and native protagonists are largely framed through European perspectives on the colonised. European characters tend to be portrayed as rational, active, authoritative, and straightforward, in contrast to local men, who are often associated with irrationality, mystery, emotional restraint, and passivity. European men in the two novels are depicted as "big brothers" who carry a colonial mission to "elevate" the natives. Meanwhile, native masculinities are filtered through colonialist and binary oppositional perspectives that perceive colonial subjects as backward, irrational, and immature. The contribution of this article lies in showing that colonial fiction produces gendered hierarchies by defining which forms of masculinity are considered rational, modern, and authoritative and which are rendered silent, passive, or culturally inferior.

Keywords: Masculinities; binary opposition; muting gender; colonial subjects, colonial masculinity

MASCULINITIES AND THE DYNAMICS OF COLONIAL POLICIES IN THE EAST INDIES

Rather than being monolithic, masculinities should be understood as multidimensional constructs contingent upon various factors, particularly social, economic, and political conditions (Connell, 2005). According to Crotty (1999, 2001), shifts in constructions of masculinity are influenced by sociopolitical dynamics, including imperialism and global movements that shape sociocultural dynamics in a society, such as feminism. Masculinity should be read in relation to wider structures of power, including colonialism, postcolonialism, imperialism, race, class, and sexuality (Thangaraj, 2022). These sociopolitical forces shape which forms of masculinity are legitimised,

idealised, or marginalised within a particular society, including how colonial encounters influence the representation of masculine identities in literature. Colonialism, in particular, plays an important role in constructing perceptions of the colonised, including binary oppositional frameworks in viewing native populations. In this sense, colonial masculinity is not only a matter of male identity, but also a cultural and political formation through which colonial power defines itself as rational, mature, and civilised while positioning the colonised as passive, irrational, or immature.

Colonial perceptions of natives as backward and passive are closely intertwined with colonial constructions of gender-based binary oppositions. Prianti (2019, p. 701) argues that the arrival of European colonisers in the archipelago strengthened hierarchical division between masculinity and femininity. According to Prianti (2019), the spread of Islam during the pre-colonial period contributed to gender structuring in the archipelago. However, the process did not result in a rigid hierarchical gender division. It was the Dutch who established a more rigid binary oppositional gender order, in which women were positioned as “the other,” a position similar to the position of the colonised in the dichotomy between the coloniser and the colonised. This is evident in the dominant gender order that emerged when the Dutch intensified their economic presence in the 17th to 18th centuries. Colonialism, in particular, plays an important role in constructing perceptions of the colonised, including binary oppositional frameworks in viewing native populations. This is in line with Quah et al. (2021) argument that Orientalist representation in literary texts often operates through the construction of the Self and the Other, where the Other is positioned as different, inferior, and difficult to assimilate into the dominant social order.

Before Indonesia emerged as a modern nation-state, the archipelago was composed of diverse kingdoms, sultanates, and local polities. Dutch involvement in the Indonesian archipelago was initially motivated by commercial interests, especially the desire to control the highly profitable spice trade in the eastern islands. This commercial project later developed into a colonial system sustained through monopoly, coercion, forced labour, and strategic alliances with local rulers (Post, 2024; van Rossum & Tosun, 2021). This period can be regarded as the first major phase of Dutch intervention in Indonesian history. This economic intervention was realised in the establishment of the Dutch East India Company (VOC, *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*).

As the Dutch realised that their ambition to dominate the spice trade required military support, they had made significant progress by around 1630 in establishing military infrastructure to sustain their economic dominance in the archipelago (Ricklefs, 1981). Not content with maintaining fortresses and control over coastal areas, the VOC adopted more aggressive military strategies as resistance from various local states intensified and threatened its hegemony (Ricklefs, 1981).

The period between 1600 and 1700, during which the VOC expanded its political and economic influence, was marked by a series of strong resistances from local states, driven by dissatisfaction with the VOC policies. In other words, this was a period characterised by bravado, brutality, and aggression against colonial intrusion.

As Dutch colonial policies in the Indies later shifted toward bureaucratic governance, masculinity became increasingly associated with order, formality, and rationality, particularly in the late 18th century and early 19th century. This replaced courage, aggression, and militarism, which were prevalent during periods of conflict and power struggle among states. However, despite these shifts, European perceptions of native masculinities did not change correspondingly. The coloniser’s binary oppositional view of the colonised as backward persisted.

The complexity that characterises the interplay between indigenous traditions and the coloniser's perceptions of the natives influences the dynamics of masculinities in the East Indies. This article attempts to examine how native masculinities are portrayed through the eyes of Dutch authors in two colonial-era novels: *Max Havelaar* by E. Douwes Dekker under the pseudonym of Multatuli (1982) and *The Hidden Force* by Louis Couperus (1985).

IMPACTS OF COLONIALISM ON THE NOTION OF MUTED MASCULINITY

Within formerly colonised societies, the notion of colonised masculinities has been widely studied. India is one of the societies that has received significant scholarly attention. These studies illustrate the various ways in which European perceptions of masculinity interacted with local masculinities. In her seminal study, *Colonial Masculinity* Sinha (1995) demonstrates how colonial policies related to gender were enacted and how they affected the expression of local norms in colonial India. Sinha argues that these policies were beneficial for maintaining colonial power, particularly by reinforcing the roles dominated by male colonial authorities.

One of the colonial policies discussed in Sinha (1995) is the Consent Bill. The formulation of the bill was driven by colonial authorities' attempts to reduce the prevalence of child marriage. However, the study shows that Indian elites strongly opposed its formalisation. This opposition highlights the difficulties the British faced when intervening in family matters. According to Sinha (1995), the resistance to the bill was partly motivated by a revival of traditional masculinities. Local elites perceived that the bill could be harmful to the preservation of their local masculine norms, which had been subordinated by colonial gender politics.

Sinha's argument highlights the significant influence of colonial policies on gender dynamics in colonised societies. Similar phenomena can also be observed in colonial Indonesia. Under colonial administration in the East Indies, there was a gap between the modern, patriarchal, and paternalistic attitudes of colonial authorities in regulating their subjects and the colonised population's preference for adhering to traditional norms. This tension may have led to the valorisation of hybridised forms of masculinity that benefited both the coloniser and the colonised.

In addition to providing a similar context to the Indonesian colonial setting, studies on Indian colonial masculinities also affirm the need to examine non-Western masculinities using frameworks different from those usually applied to Western contexts. A number of such studies have been conducted, including those by Chopra (2006), Bandyopadhyay (2006), and Ahmed (2006), which provide informative insights regarding male identities. Masculinities in colonial and postcolonial societies cannot be separated from histories of empire, racial hierarchy, classed power, religion, migration, and the politics of modernity. Kolsky (2021), for instance, demonstrates how British colonial authority in India was closely tied to a hyper-masculine performance of racial and imperial power. Other studies on postcolonial and decolonial masculinities similarly suggest that masculine identities are formed through uneven relations between dominance, marginalisation, and subalternity (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2021). Studies on Indian and South Asian contexts further indicate that masculinities are negotiated through cultural memory, religious identity, consumption, and urban belonging, rather than through a single universal model of manhood (Das et al., 2023; Murat, 2023; Shah, 2023). Based on Ardener's concept of muted gender, these studies argue that Ardener's concept of muted femininity can serve as a conceptual framework for investigating masculinities in alternative ways, which have been rarely applied in ethnographic studies on gender and masculinities (Ardener, 1972). Although

Ardener originally developed this concept to study femininities, its application in these studies highlights that the expressions of both femininity and masculinity can be muted.

Ardener's (1972) concept of muting gender emerged when he found that women's voices were not well articulated in social anthropology. Ardener (1972, p. 138) highlights the issue related to the difficulties of representing women in ethnographic studies. This insight is relevant to less visible forms of masculinity, which differ from dominant masculine norms typically associated with domination, muscularity, and power. Such alternative masculinities are often present in contexts where men are unable to express their discernible male identities. Investigating these muted masculinities can provide a more comprehensive and inclusive picture of masculinity.

The forms of masculinity identified in the three Indian ethnographic studies conducted by Chopra (2006), Bandyopadhyay (2006), and Ahmed (2006) suggest less visible and expressive types of masculinity. These masculine norms can be considered muted because they differ from the dominant masculine norms widely accepted across societies. Such dominant norms are usually associated with men's roles as family breadwinners, their control over others, and their ability to demonstrate competence in domains traditionally linked to masculine dominance. Muted masculinities, however, can be identified within settings associated with male domination and within spaces traditionally perceived as women's domains. Chopra (2006) examined how masculine expressions were suppressed and recovered through the act of veiling among Indian domestic workers. Meanwhile, Bandyopadhyay (2006) explores the manifestation of masculinity within prisons, settings strongly associated with men's domination. Ahmed (2006) discussed the ways effeminacy, invisibility, resistance and autonomy were intertwined in beauty parlours, which were stereotypically linked to women's domain.

This study employs Ardener's notion of muting gender to examine how Dutch colonial novels present Europeans' perceptions of native masculinities. The concept is used as an analytical framework to examine less visible expressions of native masculinities.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted based on two novels, *Max Havelaar* by E. Douwes Dekker or Multatuli and *The Hidden Force* by Louis Couperus. The research examines how the two novels portray native masculinities through the perspectives of European characters. The formal elements analysed in the novels primarily concern the characterisation of the European and native protagonists. However, a discussion of several female protagonists is also provided. The examination of these female protagonists is particularly useful for showing how the contrast between European masculinities and their native counterparts parallels that between masculinity and femininity. In this context, native masculinities are frequently associated with the notions of femininity. Drawing on Ardener's concept of muting gender, this study examines how masculine expressions among the natives are muted by the Dutch protagonists' colonial perspectives. This study defines masculinities as socio-cultural constructs that associate men with certain values and behaviours, emotional codes, bodily dispositions and social expectations. Hence, masculinities cannot be reduced to being singular but are the sum of multiple heterogeneous forms contingently and relationally produced across social, political, racial and colonial hierarchies. Defining masculinities as multiple, Connell (2005) suggests that they are structured socially through relations of domination, subordination, and marginalisation. The underlying argument is that masculinities need to be understood contextually, as masculine ideals are highly dependent upon

historical, geographical and sociopolitical settings (Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2024; Mellström, 2023).

From this perspective, native masculinities in *Max Havelaar* and *The Hidden Force* are seen as representations of indigenous men shaped by the European colonial gaze. They are not seen as reflections of real native men, but as literary creations inspired by colonial power discourse. This study uses Ardener's muted groups to explore how native masculine expressions are filtered, constrained, or symbolically rendered impotent by more powerful European narrative frames of reference (Ardener, 1972). Therefore, to mute is not simply to enter a state of silence but also to forfeit symbolic authority. This study identifies, through qualitative literary analysis, the process by which colonial fiction narrates European masculinities as commanding and casts native masculinities as feminised and deficient. In addition to the two novels as the primary sources, a number of secondary sources were used to provide historical information that complements the literary analysis. These secondary sources mainly address the political and historical contexts of colonial policies that might have indirectly influenced the expression of masculinities in the East Indies.

COLONIAL NOTIONS OF GENDER AND MASCULINITIES

As the archipelago's economy deteriorated and the VOC, as a profit-oriented corporation, faced serious financial problems stemming from internal corruption, it was dissolved on January 1, 1800, and the Dutch government assumed control over its territories (Ricklefs, 1981, p. 106). As such, Dutch colonialism in the Indies intensified through imperialist expansion. From a gender perspective, this development could be a potential cause of the remapping of gender relations. During the Dutch colonial period, European notions of gender construction interacted with local perspectives that had already been shaped by cultural encounters with foreign elements.

One way to examine colonial notions of gender and masculinity, and their interaction with colonial perceptions of gender norms, is through Dutch colonial literature. One of the earliest and most prominent novels in the literature is *Max Havelaar* by E. Douwes Dekker, writing under the pseudonym of Multatuli, published in 1860. As a work by a Dutch writer, it becomes a critique of Dutch colonial practices in the Indies. By exposing the detrimental effects of *the Cultuurstelsel* (forced cultivation system) on the native population, the novel articulates a romantic and crusading mission to protect and secure justice for those oppressed by the exploitative nature of colonial rule and corrupt indigenous rulers. Nevertheless, as E. M. Beekman (1982) states in the afterword, Dekker is essentially an imperialist, despite expressing sympathetic attitudes toward the colonised people under Dutch rule.

As a novel based on Dekker's experience as a colonial officer in West Java in 1856, its criticism of colonial practices clearly echoes the colonial mission to improve the well-being of the colonial subjects since they were perceived to be unable to do so by themselves. Dekker's utopian dream of a prosperous Java under colonial rule is highlighted by E. M. Beekman (1982) from the memoirs of one of Dekker's several young lovers, Sietske Abrahamsz, who reported that he aspired to become Emperor of the Indies. This reveals an ambiguity, a tension between the compassionate mission to save the natives from colonial exploitation and the masculine insistence on achieving the goal. This ambiguity is vividly captured in the depiction of the novel's protagonist, *Max Havelaar*, as a "vessel of contradictions": "Sharp as a razor, yet tender-hearted as a young girl, he was always the first to feel the wound his bitter words had inflicted, and he

suffered more from it than the injured party did.” (Multatuli, 1982, p. 89). The image of a razor evokes masculine sharpness and decisiveness, while emotional sensitivity is identified with a form of femininity.

The portrayal of Max Havelaar as a compassionate yet strong-willed “big brother” who lifts his “younger brothers” out of suffering embodies Dekker’s masculine vision of Dutch colonialism. Through Havelaar, Dekker foregrounds the ideal masculinities of colonialism while representing local officers of the colonial government as the Dutch man’s “younger brothers”. In the novel, Dekker outlines the duties of European officials in guiding their “younger brothers”:

...the European official is to treat the native officer who assists him as his younger brother. But he must not forget that his younger brother is greatly beloved—or feared—by their parents and that, in the event of differences between them, his greater 'age' would be a reason for blaming him for not having treated his younger brother with more indulgence or tact.

(Multatuli, 1982)

The passage suggests that seniority is the basis for claiming the responsibility to treat the natives appropriately. However, the “age difference” may also reflect the gap between native backwardness and European progress. The novel ties native masculinity to a paternalistic hierarchy of maturity and dependency, thereby promoting European masculinity. Such a hierarchy is evident in the depiction of local administrative officials or regents, whose status as Javanese male elites is recognised but at the same time undermined by the colonial narrator. Despite their high rank in the colonial administration, the local officials are not presented equally to their Dutch colleagues. Their indirectness, self-restraint, and adherence to related *priyayi* etiquette are interpreted as signs of immaturity rather than as culturally specific modes of masculine self-control. This shows how colonial power affects the dynamics of masculinities within a colonial framework, creating different forms and ranks of masculinity. Dutch masculinity is associated with rationality, directness, and administrative discipline, while native masculinity is muted, infantilised, and feminised through its association with passivity, hesitation, and dependency (Ardener, 1972; Connell, 2005; Prianti, 2019). The regents were appointed by the colonial government on the basis of their noble status in the Javanese feudal system. These figures belonged to the aristocratic *priyayi* class. One such character is the Regent of Lebak, Radhen Adhipatti Karta Natta Negara. As a refined Javanese *priyayi*, he is introduced as a cultured elder who carefully considers his speech. In *priyayi* etiquette, indirect communication and discussion of trivial matters are used to avoid potentially offensive topics. However, the narrator, who likely articulated Multatuli’s opinion, expresses a preference for “natural straightforwardness, without any attempt at diplomatic circumspection” (Multatuli, 1982). This indirectly hints at the unwillingness of the colonial narrator to understand the *priyayi* etiquette in its own cultural context. Politically correct, indirect, and cautious expressions are seen as impractical or evasive in the Western perspective. However, from the Javanese point of view, they represent self-control, sophistication, and social etiquette. Javanese refined behaviour or *alus* corresponds to politeness, subtlety, self-control and civilised manners, while its opposition, *kasar*, is defined as coarseness, rudeness and unrestrained behaviour (Efferin & Hopper, 2007; Retsikas, 2007). In Java, people use indirect speech to preserve politeness to avoid conflict and negotiate hierarchy (Atmawati et al., 2024). Thus, other than selfishly wanting a quick response from the local men, the straight-talking that the narrator dreams of ultimately exposes colonial masculine criteria that valorise directness and administrative efficiency whilst misrecognising *priyayi* masculinity as passive. Contrary to the local perspective, the narrator assumes that straightforwardness is natural and, therefore, the best way to deal with Javanese elites. This assumption is gendered because straightforwardness is not treated merely as

a communication style, but as a sign of mature and authoritative manhood. In the colonial narrative, the ability to speak directly, act decisively, and administer rationally becomes associated with European masculine authority. Meanwhile, Javanese indirectness is recoded as hesitation, weakness, or lack of masculine maturity.

Considering their own masculine norms as the most natural and acceptable ways of being male reflects the Dutch male characters' attempts to perceive native masculinities as the Other. This reflects a colonial hierarchy of masculinity in which European masculinity is positioned as rational, active, and self-governing, whereas Javanese masculinity is represented as dependent, obscure, and insufficiently legible within European categories of manhood. Such a hierarchy resonates with Connell's argument that masculinities are relationally organised through dominance, subordination, and marginalisation (Connell, 2005). It can be said that the European male characters have muted masculine expressions of Javanese men. Being *alus* is perceived to be less desirable than being straightforward. In Ardener's framework, this position indicates that what Javanese subjects practise as a masculine ethic is placed in a zone of "inaudibility" by the colonial narrator. Havelaar and the Dutch officials comment on the conduct of the *priyayi* and, at the same time, establish the linguistic categories that are recognised as legitimate for speaking about justice, courage, and responsibility. The cautious manner of speaking, the use of seemingly trivial topics, and the strategies of avoiding open conflict adopted by Javanese aristocrats emerge from a specific moral order that values self-restraint and social harmony. Yet, within Javanese cultural logic, *alus* should not be understood as passivity. Studies of Indonesian masculinities show that emotional self-restraint, refinement, and controlled conduct have been central to Javanese models of authoritative masculinity, especially in the *priyayi* tradition (Nilan, 2009; Wulan, 2022). Colonial narration interprets these practices as defects of character rather than as deliberate ethical choices. At this point, muting arises because the colonial interpretive framework places these practices outside what counts as a valid masculine discourse, even though they continue to operate at the level of everyday conduct. In this sense, *alus* masculinity is muted because it remains present in practice but is denied recognition as a legitimate form of masculine authority.

Upon closer examination, this positioning also obscures the internal diversity of Javanese masculinities. Regents and *priyayi* who appear in the text are reduced to a single image of the Javanese male subject. Historically, courtly *alus* masculinity follows a different logic from the masculine ideals of peasants or soldiers, which foreground physical bravery. *Max Havelaar* presents a singular, bundled version of "Javanese masculinity" in juxtaposition with "Dutch masculinity," which is portrayed as rational and straightforward, so that the nuances within Javanese masculinities themselves are subsumed into this colonial opposition. The silencing process operates not only at the level of colonial-native relations but also at the intra-Javanese level, where only one version of Javanese manhood is allowed to stand in for the whole.

At the level of narration, the dominance of the colonial voice appears in the pattern of focalisation. The stories about the Regent of Lebak and other local officials are invariably mediated through the viewpoint of Dutch characters or narrators. Readers are rarely invited into the inner conflicts or moral reflections of Javanese characters; what surfaces instead is Havelaar's interpretation of their silence, hesitation, or willingness to "compromise" with the system. In Ardener's terms, this situation demonstrates how a dominant group monopolises both the right to speak and the categories used to determine what counts as rational, cowardly, brave, or passive. Javanese masculinity becomes "muted" because it appears mainly as an object of observation and is given little space to articulate its own language of action and ethic.

At the same time, the novel gestures toward the possibility that what is read as Javanese passivity can instead be understood as a strategy of survival within an unequal colonial context. Self-restraint, the choice of safe topics, and the avoidance of open confrontation may be viewed as efforts to maintain social harmony and protect the position of family and community under political pressure. The colonial framework recognises courage primarily in the form of open confrontation, as embodied by Havelaar. Therefore, quieter forms of courage tend to slip from view. An analysis based on muted gender enables the observation that behind the image of Javanese men as "mysterious" and "indecisive" lies a masculine ethic that works through patience, emotional control, and calculated social manoeuvre—an ethic that asserts a distinct cultural autonomy outside colonial masculine ideals.

A study by Wulan (2013) demonstrates that this perceived muted masculinity is, in fact, a desirable form of Javanese masculinity. Basing her analysis on Indonesian literature for young adults from the post-New-Order period, Wulan finds that this restrained masculinity is equally valorised by both state-affiliated and private publishers. This masculine norm is characterised by attributes usually associated with mature men. Male protagonists who serve as role models in these narratives are generally reliable, patient, mature, less self-centred, loving, and responsible. The preference for these restrained and selfless protagonists may be considered to be an inherent feature of Javanese, or even Indonesian, masculinities.

The radical, romantic, and determined Western idealism aimed at enlightening the native population and eradicating corrupt administration involving both Dutch and local officials clashes with Javanese ethos of patience represented by the triad *iklas*, *sabar*, and *nrima* (E. Beekman, 1996). These are central Javanese values, which highlight the absence of “eagerness, of impatience, of headstrong passion, and the acceptance of the inevitable with grace” (E. Beekman, 1996). The two models of male authority are juxtaposed in the novel. Dutch male authority, represented by Havelaar and Slotering, is constructed on the basis of moral heroism that valorises direct confrontation and reformist will. On the other hand, the Javanese counterparts are associated with patience, restraint, and attempts to maintain social harmony. Control over one's own actions and behaviour is integral to Javanese *priyayi* ethic, but it should not be interpreted as cowardly passivity (Errington, 1984). Similarly, representations of Indonesian masculinity suggest that masculine ideals are not simply based on domination or assertiveness. Rather, they are established through responsibility, emotional restraint and collective obligation (Nilan, 2009; Wulan, 2022). If the attempts to combat corruption had been carried out more tactfully, the tragic events described in the novel, particularly the death of the Dutch official Mr Slotering, might not have occurred. Like Havelaar, Mr Slotering was determined and radical in pursuing his romantic vision. In realising his idealism, he exposed corruption among local chiefs, which could potentially have led to the removal of those native officials from their administrative position. It was speculated that he had been poisoned during lunch at the house of Dhemang Parang-Kujang, a local chief suspected of abusing his power. Thus, Slotering's fate reveals the limit of colonial masculinity: it recognises courage only when expressed through open confrontation, while muting Javanese forms of masculine maturity that operate through patience, indirectness, and restraint.

Max Havelaar was immensely influential, contributing to legislative efforts in the Netherlands to reform Dutch colonial policies in the Indies. This marked a shift in the spirit of Dutch colonialism from an exploitative system to a more liberal and “humanistic” approach. Based on ethical considerations, the former system of forced cultivation was no longer perceived as appropriate. As proposed by Dr Abraham Kuyper in 1874, the author of the ideological platform of the *Anti-Revolutionaire Partij* (Anti-Revolutionary Party), Dutch colonial rule should replace

the former exploitative system with a policy whose primary moral aim was to elevate Indonesians from their “backward” condition (Gouda, 1998). Gouda further argues that from the formulation of Kuyper’s *Ons Program* (Our Program) until the Japanese conquest of the Dutch East Indies in 1942, the terms *ethical trusteeship*, *moral tutelage*, and *parental guidance* were inseparable from discourses on Dutch colonial practices in Indonesia (Gouda, 1998). Considering the presence of those terms in the discourse of the new colonial policy, known as the Ethical Policy, it is clear that the Dutch government still attempted to maintain the gap between the colonial rulers and their subjects. A way to achieve it is through allusions to a paternal relationship in the discussions of the relationship between the Dutch government and the East Indies. The gendered metaphors used by the Dutch government in justifying its colonisation of Indonesia were associated with features socially perceived as feminine and masculine qualities. This resulted in contrasting images of Dutch colonisation, characterised by both maternal affection and masculine discipline (Gouda, 1998). The moral ambiguities of Dutch colonial rule are apparent in the contradictions characterising its policies. It was “motherly” and nurturing when obliged to respect local customs and traditions. Meanwhile, it shifted this motherly posture into a more masculine mode when it sought to impose moral discipline and scientific rigour on the natives (Gouda, 1998).

In relation to the contrast between Western civilisation and the world of the colonial subject, Beekman associates it with the difference between the typical climates of the West and the East. According to Beekman, there is a sharp distinction between the two that seems unlikely to be reconciled. The former, associated with winter, is linked to compulsory learning, whereas the latter, associated with summer, is connected to joyful and sensuous living. Using Freudian terms, Beekman connects the joyful summer of the Indies to the unrestrained id, and the Netherlands to the restrictive superego (E. Beekman, 1996). Compulsory learning is associated with discipline, formality, and regularity, which are typically associated with masculine norms. On the other hand, joyfulness and sensuality are closely associated with the feminine.

Beekman’s observations on the colonial opposition of gender norms in the Indies align with Darren C. Zook’s interpretation of *Max Havelaar* and its colonial perceptions of the natives. According to Zook, the novel does not primarily expose colonial injustices suffered by the natives. Rather, it implies the significant role played by the natives in undermining the perceived notions of the coloniser as more civilised and enlightened. Zook argues that the novel displays how the colonial administration in the Indies shows “... signs of ‘going native’...” and allows “...native values to influence and corrupt the enlightened lexicon of Dutch values” (Zook, 2006, p. 1174). He further states that “*Max Havelaar* is not, as many admirers have claimed, an indictment of an empire that had gone too far, but rather the indictment of an empire that had not gone far enough” (Zook, 2006, p. 1174).

Based on Beekman’s argument and in line with the shift of the colonial rule toward the ethos of the “white man’s burden”, it can be argued that Dutch colonialism, particularly following the implementation of the Ethical Policy from the late 19th century, became increasingly associated with formality and regularity. This marked a departure from the earlier emphasis on a courageous, aggressive, and militaristic form of masculinity, evident during a period defined by warfare and power struggles among states.

The association of Dutch colonial rule with formal bureaucracy was accompanied by the emergence of literary works that both illustrated and criticised this tendency. Beekman asserts that those literary works reveal “... the transition from an age of heroism to one of prudence, from order to regularity, ... and the regulatory mediocrity of later Dutch imperialism that the best of Dutch colonial writers rebelled, as did the authors of romanticism” (E. M. Beekman, 1982).

Louis Couperus, the author of *The Hidden Force*, a prominent Dutch colonial novel first published in 1900, articulates the critique identified by Beekman. By focusing the narrative on the life of Resident Van Oudijck, a senior Dutch officer appointed as the administrative head of a fictitious region called Labuwangi in East Java, Couperus exposes the dullness and insensibility of colonialism with all its administrative formality and regularity. This is contrasted sharply with the mystery and unpredictability of Javanese society and environment in which Van Oudijck performs his duties. It is also possible to associate masculinity with colonial seriousness, regularity, and formality, while femininity may be linked to irregularity, sensibility, and inventiveness. The insensitivity of Dutch colonialism is embodied in the protagonist, Van Oudijck. At the same time, the dynamics and sensibility of women are represented in the character of Eva Eldersma, the wife of a senior officer in Labuwangi.

Although he is portrayed as experiencing loneliness and longing for the emotional warmth of domestic life, Van Oudijck realises that he must suppress these feelings, as his administrative duties demand that he stay focused on his work. A strong inner tension emerges between his rational commitment to his administrative duties and the allure of the mysterious Indies, which he attempts to deny. His first thoughts each morning concern matters related to his district, and when he grows weary, he “inhaled together with the coolness of the sea its melancholy, the mysterious melancholy of the Indian seas, the haunting melancholy of the seas of Java, the melancholy that rushes in from afar in whispering, mysterious wings. But it was not his nature to yield to mystery. He denied mystery...” (Couperus, 1985, p.47). From Ardener’s perspective, Van Oudijck stands as the clearest example of a colonial masculinity that is fully “heard” within the narrative. His commitment to schedules, reports, and regulations provides the basic vocabulary through which the text defines authority and responsibility. The language of administration – exact, restrained, and linear – frames what counts as rational masculinity in the novel. By contrast, Javanese ways of sensing and responding to the environment, which rely on signs, premonitions, and a dense network of obligations, appear as background noise. Although they structure everyday life in Labuwangi, they rarely acquire the status of an articulated viewpoint. Van Oudijck’s refusal to acknowledge “mystery” can therefore be interpreted as a refusal to recognise an alternative grammar of experience. His masculinity depends on a continuous effort to exclude that grammar from official discourse.

The narrative, therefore, constructs a hierarchy of male voices. The Resident’s voice circulates through letters, decrees, and exchanges with fellow Europeans, while Javanese men appear largely through rumours about “unrest,” fragmented reports, or indirect speech. Their emotional registers surface in the text as atmosphere rather than as argument. This corresponds to the form of muting that Ardener describes: a situation in which a group possesses its own ways of speaking and understanding. Yet, these are not fully legitimised within the dominant representational system.

In contrast to Van Oudijck and her husband, Eva Eldersma is portrayed as a sensible and cultivated woman who realises the lack of intellectual and spiritual nourishment within the colonial administrative environment. From her perspective as a European woman, the native land appears more promising in terms of cultivating the mind and spirit. She becomes disappointed upon realising that the absurdities and irregularities of the East that she once imagined have almost disappeared under colonial rule. In Eva’s view, the loss of the Indies’ naturalness and authenticity is symbolised by the roses “carefully fertilised with horse droppings packed as high as the rim of the pots with the result that, when there’s a breeze, the scent of the roses mingles with the stench

of fresh manure” (Couperus, 1985, p.76). The fertiliser made from horse manure is a metaphor for the artificiality imposed by colonialism on the native land.

To contrast the formal and rational masculinities of colonial officers with the perceived irrational and mysterious masculinities of the natives, or local rulers, Couperus portrays a native regent, Sunario, as “impractical, a degenerate Javanese, an unhinged Javanese fop” (Couperus, 1985, p. 68). The apparent mystery of Javanese men seems to stem from Europeans' misunderstanding of Javanese cultural norms. In Javanese belief, the concept of *alus*, which refers to a refined personality characterised by an ability to restrain from public display of emotion or feeling, is more highly valued than the concept of *kasar*, which represents its opposite.

Ardener's concept of muting gender can explain how Dutch male characters perceive the native men's masculine expressions. Applying their own standard of masculinity, these characters misinterpret the gender practices of the natives as impractical and mysterious. In Javanese culture, emotional restraint and the avoidance of overt expression are markers of cultural identity. In other words, restraint functions as a cultural statement, rather than an inability to articulate oneself. This is evident in the way Sunario is described through explicitly dismissive terms such as 'impractical,' 'degenerate,' and 'unhinged' (Couperus, 1985, p. 68). These words do not simply describe his personality; they also position his Javanese masculinity outside the colonial ideal of rational, disciplined, and administratively useful manhood. In other words, Sunario's masculinity is not allowed to appear as a coherent cultural form, but is translated by the colonial gaze into signs of irrationality and disorder. When Dutch characters read Javanese restraint as mystery or impracticality, they are not merely misunderstanding a cultural code; they are also muting an alternative masculine ethic. In Ardener's terms, the dominant group controls the categories through which subordinate groups are made intelligible, so Javanese masculinity becomes visible only when it is translated into colonial terms such as passivity, degeneracy, or irrationality (Ardener, 1972). Thus, Sunario's characterisation provides textual evidence of how the novel converts Javanese *alus* masculinity into a feminised and deficient form of native manhood.

Another character who embodies Eastern “mystery” is Addy de Luce, a young man of Indo-European descent, the son of the owner of the Patjaram sugar factory. Addy's grandmother is a Solo princess who marries a French bohemian adventurer. His seductive physical beauty is described as the harmonious blend of the lineage of a Solo princess and a French adventurer. The harmony of his physique compensates for his lack of intellectual curiosity—his blood, flesh, and muscles— which form physical seductiveness “so perfectly and stupidly beautiful” (Couperus, 1985, p. 104). These contradictions and dualities—particularly those that contrast the stereotypes of Eastern intellectual incapacity with sensual appeal represented by Addy—reflect Dutch colonial attitudes toward mixed-blood individuals and interracial relations around 1900. From the early period of Dutch presence in the Indies through the late 19th century, the union of European men and Asian women were accepted due to the scarcity of European women. However, this mixed Indo culture started to be regarded as a sign of evil at the beginning of the 20th century (Pattynama, 1998). Addy's mixed heritage is considered dangerous to the preservation of white racial purity, which may explain why Van Oudijck did not agree to his daughter's relationship with Addy.

In *The Hidden Force*, the differences between the natives and the Dutch coloniser are similar to those between females and males. The native is characterised by intuition, mystery, and irregularity, while the Dutch is associated with formality, rationality, regularity, and artificiality. The emphasis on practicality, industriousness, and rationality introduced by Dutch colonialism appears to obscure the Indies' spiritually powerful force. Although the overt aggressiveness

associated with earlier forms of masculinities had been replaced by “softer” masculinities emphasising formal and practical rationality, their dominant natures persisted.

CONCLUSION

In both *Max Havelaar* and *The Hidden Force*, masculine norms associated with colonial subjects are largely constructed through European perspectives. European and Javanese masculinities in these novels tend to be portrayed within binary oppositional perspectives. *Max Havelaar* presents the contradictions more sharply by positioning European masculinities as a “big brother” figure tasked with guiding and “maturing” colonial subjects. Meanwhile, the portrayal of local masculinities in *The Hidden Force* is closely associated with irrationality and disorder. The portrayal of native males as less rational reinforces the colonial assumption that they are not yet capable of self-governance. Their behaviours are often infantilised, depicted as impulsive or overly emotional, which serves to justify the colonial claim of paternal authority. In accordance with Ardener’s concept of muting gender, the masculine expressions of the natives are rendered less visible. This marginalisation can serve as a pretext for the coloniser to position themselves as superior within the binary opposition of masculine expression.

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