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Multatuli and the Tendency of Anarchism

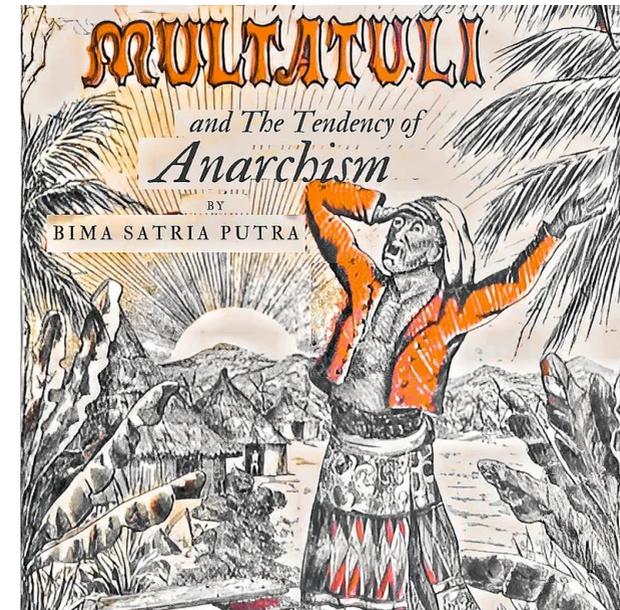
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2023

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Once, the Indonesian writer Y.B. Mangunwijaya in an interview in the 1980s was asked who his favorite writer was. Mangunwijaya mentions two names: Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Multatuli. Then the interviewer innocently asked an unexpected question, “What about foreign writers?”—he thought Multatuli was an Indonesian writer.¹

Multatuli does occupy a slightly ambivalent position. It is as if playing two legs, between foreigners and natives. There is almost simultaneous attraction and repulsion. From a more extreme side, like in 2017, for example, dozens of Lebak students protested against the increasingly widespread use of the name Multatuli. “A good colonizer is still a colonizer,” they said. In Lebak Regency, Banten, his name is indeed scattered. It has been used as the name of streets, meeting halls, regional drinking water companies, and museums.

I am not interested in conducting a post-colonial literary study of the place of the Multatuli in Indonesian society. Framing of this kind has often been done. Instead, I want to let Multatuli speak from his own pen, about his ideas and about how he positions himself.

His real name is Eduard Douwes Dekker. He first set sail for the Indies in 1838 and shortly thereafter joined the colony service. After changing offices several times, Eduard was appointed Assistant Resident in Lebak, Banten (1856). Determined to expose the scandals he had witnessed for years in the Dutch East Indies, Eduard wrote a novel entitled *Max Havelaar* which appeared in 1860. He used the Latin phrase, Multatuli (literally: “I Suffered Much”) as the pseudonym. He became known by that name and continued to use it in his later writings.

Max Havelaar, the main character in the novel, is a Dutch civil servant in Java. He burned with anger alone because of his idealism to end the mistreatment and oppression that was carried out by colonial government officials and local native officials against the population. The district head were involved in brutal “extortion” by confiscating the buffaloes of the farmers without proper compensation. The kind-hearted Max tries to compensate out of his own money and this only puts him in debt. He also tried to report but was ignored.

One by one, Max’s every move changes the situation from bad to disastrous that destroys his career. Max resigns from his job (in poverty), then writes his story. By the end, the author Multatuli almost brings (and obscures) the fiction

¹ Darren C. Zook, ‘Searching for Max Havelaar: Multatuli, Colonial History, and the Confusion of Empire’, on: *mln* 121 (2006), pg. 1182.



into reality, as he emerges as himself and cries out, “help and assistance...by force of lawful means, if necessary.”²

Max Havelaar sent shockwaves across Europe when it was first published and prompted liberals to reform “ethical politics” for the welfare of Java. He inspired a generation of intellectuals from Karl Marx (but not vice versa), Hermann Hesse, Sigmund Freud and many figures from various political spectrums, ranging from socialists, nationalists, liberals, and especially anarchists.

German anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker, who was also secretary of the IWA, praised the work and described Max Havelaar’s libertarian leanings in his *Multatuli: An Anarchist Seer* (1933) which appeared in the anarchist magazine *Freedom* in London. Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin once compared Multatuli with Friedrich Nietzsche, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and Henrik Ibsen. Their work, writes Kropotkin, “is full of ideas which show how closely anarchism is intertwined with the ongoing work of modern thought in the same direction as the restoration of human rights from the entanglements of the state and capitalism.”³

Appreciation arose from many groups, but it was anarchists who were most active in translating and promoting this work in the world’s major languages.⁴ The German translation was done by Wilhelm Spohr, who worked in German anarchist circles. The French translation was done by anarchists: the first was published in 1876 thanks to A.J. Nieuwenhuis and later by the Dutch anarchist Alexander Cohen in 1901.

In turn, their translations are republished or used as references in translations in various other countries. Cohen’s translation prompted a second English translation published in 1927 by Willem Siebenhaar, a Dutch anarchist who went to Australia in 1891. The Willem Siebenhaar translation was later published in the United States by Knoopf in New York. While Spohr’s translation was suspected of being an intermediary text to be re-translated into Russian.⁵ The anarchist writer Felipe Alaiz de Pablo was greatly inspired by Multatuli and was the first to introduce

² Eduard Douwes Dekker. *Max Havelaar: Lelang Kopi Maskapai Dagang Belanda* (1977), pg 229.

³ Peter Kropotkin, “Anarchism” (1910) on *The Encyclopedia Britannica*.

⁴ Studies on the translation of Max Havelaar, see: Baggio, Lucia. 2017. “Translating Multatuli: The reception of ‘Max Havelaar’ In Italy and the Rest of Europe.” Unpublished.

⁵ Grave, Jaap & Ekaterina Vekshina. “Max Havelaar van Multatuli in Rusland: het ontstaan van de vertalingen [Max Havelaar by Multatuli in Russia: The origins of translation]” on *СКАНДИНАВСКАЯ ФИЛОЛОГИЯ (SCANDINAVICA)*, Vol.19, No.1, June 2021., pg 176-189.

this work in Spain and Mexico.⁶ The Jewish anarchist newspaper *Arbeter fraynd* [Friend of Labor] in London also advertised a Hebrew translation in their literary supplement.⁷

Although some writers claim that Multatuli is an anarchist,⁸ Eduard Douwes Dekker himself has never publicly declared himself an anarchist. Actually, Multatuli was originally more like a conservative and despotic. If the administration of the Kingdom of the Netherlands is to regain its sense of justice, it can do so by rewarding Multatuli for his criticism and rash acts and giving him a position of sufficient (or absolute) powers to deal with the native leaders and their enemies in the “corrupt” Dutch colonial administration for ever. With power, he believes he can improve the situation. In 1876, Multatuli wrote:

“I was despotic by design, by calculation, on purpose. I have forced those traits upon me because I have come to the conclusion, after constant observation and deep thought, that this is the only way to get anything done. . . . It took the Indies two hundred to three hundred years for a form of government that resembled feudalism. But before anything else, in this organization, there must be despotism without limits.. [sic].”⁹

Multatuli’s criticism was directed at getting him a position, which he did. When the government began to worry about the critical novel, Multatuli took this opportunity to sue. First, he wanted a promotion (first to become Resident, and then Member of the Council of the Indies). In addition, he asked for a large sum of money and a prestigious medal to recognize his services. “I’m suffering a lot” means not the result of the injustice of the government on the population, but on himself. *Max Havelaar* is thus not an anti-colonial novel, and Multatuli does not criticize the system of forced cultivation. On the contrary, he encouraged reforms to better organize colonialism. Multatuli once said he “does not challenge law and order, but opposes the violation of law and order.”¹⁰

⁶ Raemdonck, Anne van. “Felipe Alaíz de Pablo, de eerste ‘Multatuli-fan’ in Spanje” on *Futhark: revista de investigación y cultura*, No.9, 2014, pg 467-481.

⁷ Torres, Anna Elena. 2019. “The Anarchist Sage/Der Goen Anarkhist: Rabbi Yankev-Meir Zalkind and Religious Genealogies of Anarchism.” Accessed from: ingeveb.org.

⁸ Authors who claim that Eduard Douwes Dekker is an anarchist for example, Dutch Marxist theorists Frank van der Goes (1896), Nicolas Walter (2011), as well as two Russian historians Vadim Damier and Kirill Limanov (2017).

⁹ Multatuli. *Max Havelaar, or, The coffee auctions of the Dutch Trading Company* (1982), pg 354-355.

¹⁰ Multatuli. *Ibid*, pg 385.

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It's like a completely opposite era: this is an age where idealism is said to only be monopolized by young people, and as time goes by, this idealism will disappear. In fact, more than a hundred years ago, Multatuli's anarchist tendencies only appeared at the end of his life, a few years before his death in 1887. For most of his life, Multatuli was dreaming of himself as an emperor in Indonesia (which at that time he called Insulinde). His naivete is not the destruction of power, but the usurpation of it.

Multatuli is also important to me, because it makes me reflect. Imagine, Multatuli has inspired the anti-colonial movement in the colonial world (almost the entire generation of independence movement activists -Kartini, Tjipto Mangunkusumo, Tan Malaka, Soekarno, etc., applauded him). Strangely, at this time he was insignificant. I have never met a student who said he became a revolutionary after reading *Max Havelaar*. Does this mean that Multatuli is irrelevant for us in post-independence Indonesia?

Let you conclude for yourself whether Multatuli's critique of colonial structures is still useful in the midst of agrarian conflicts in Indonesia, starting from Pakel, in Tamansari, in Kendeng, Bara-Baraya, Kinipan, and every inch of this "freedom" land. I think it is no exaggeration that Mangunwijaya said that he was inspired by Multatuli, when he wrote in his novel *The Weaverbirds* (1981):

"My father and I and my mother were far more free in spirit than the Soekarnos who hypnotized the masses of people into hysterics and died ridiculously for relying on sharp bamboo sticks against the Mustangs and Howitzer guns that once defeated the Japanese Emperor's army. Sorry, you got the wrong address and named me a Dutch slave. To me NICA is just a means like the Republic is to them a means too. All this nonsense about freedom is just a deceptive slogan. Did you think that the villagers would be more independent under the red and white [flag] of the Republic of Indonesia, than under the Dutch crown? Which is more independent, independent under the throne of their own Javanese kings or under the Dutch East Indies?"

In the midst of the climate crisis, land grabbing, the criminalization of farmers and indigenous peoples, the perpetuation of the low wage regime, to all of our seemingly endless exploitation and suffering, Indonesia can actually be far crueller than the Netherlands. I threaten the current ruling class, using the Multatuli threat on the then ruling class: "through violence by illegal means, it is necessary." If Multatuli is given a second chance to be reborn, I guarantee he will be a complete anarchist.

What kind of passion, then, was the driving force of the anarchists of the day for the promulgation of *Max Havelaar*? What explains the closeness of Multatuli's work to anarchism?

Socialist and Marxist theorist Frank van der Goes stated that Multatuli was very influential in socialist and anarchist circles in the Netherlands, because "incidentally, everything that forms the core of anarchist theory, is in his works." He cynically labeled Multatuli "anarchist patron of the Netherlands."¹¹

The anarchist sympathies for Multatuli are well founded. Multatuli did not call himself a socialist in the sense of party politics (as he did not want to be called a liberal or a conservative), but at his time he did have socialist thoughts. For example, he campaigned for an improvement in the position of workers, an increase in teachers' salaries, and an improvement in the position of women. It is therefore not surprising that socialists consider him to have a kindred spirit.

Although at first he was a power-hungry romantic colonialist, Multatuli gradually grew more radical. He has repeatedly opposed government interference in education and mandatory vaccines. In a letter to H.C. Muller dated August 15, 1886, Multatuli also stated that he was not a socialist and not even anti-socialism, because according to him the socialists wanted to make the State 'Almighty'. He continued:

"I do my best to urge less interference from the Evil which is referred to as the 'Government'. The socialists are constantly defending and pushing for new laws, while I am of the opinion that one should especially push for the abolition of the laws."¹²

Multatuli's idea received support from his close friends. "I, just like you, also support minimal interference from the state," wrote Sikko Ernest Willem Roorda van Eysinga to Multatuli.¹³ Like Multatuli, the Dutch socialist who was born in Semarang, worked for a short time as a tobacco plantation manager and a railway engineer. During his work he witnessed the plight of the local population. This experience inspired him to publish a poem in the *Bataviaasch Handelsblad*, which highlighted the starvation of the indigenous population under the title, "Vloekzang, de laatste dag der Hollanders op Java door Sentot" [Song of the curse, the last day of the Dutch in Java by Sentot]. Multatuli liked this poem and included it in the fourth edition of *Max Havelaar* in 1875.

¹¹ Frank van der Goes. *Multatuli over Socialisme* (1896).

¹² Kornelis ter Laan. *Multatuli Encyclopedie* (1995), pg 388.

¹³ Letter from Sikko Ernest Willem Roorda van Eysinga to Multatuli dated 21 August 1886. Accessed from <https://multatuli.online/brieven/datum/brief?j=1886&b=mb07725>

According to Eysinga, socialists and anarchists are too absolute. Even so, “at least I wished for a bit of the happiness that Louise Michel predicted,” he wrote. But the two don’t stop at the minimalist country. Roorda then moved to Clarens, Switzerland in 1881, where he became acquainted with anarchists and socialists such as Elie Reclus and L. Metchnikoff. Most notably, Eysinga began to fall in love with the ideas of the French anarchist Pierre Joseph Proudhon. From Switzerland he also wrote for the anarchist newspaper *Le Revolté* in Paris and corresponded with Peter Kropotkin.

Multatuli, too, moves in the same direction. In the *Ideen* [Ideas] series, Multatuli finally wrote:

“The ideal form of government is the absence of government. What makes that ideal approach possible? The reduced need for people to be governed, namely: development, civilization, enlightenment, etc. If each one knew what he must do, and acted accordingly, all government would be in vain.”¹⁴

Multatuli’s ideas in his old age approached anarchism politically. But E.M. Beekman, who has blatantly exposed Multatuli, in the afterwords of the English version of *Max Havelaar*, has outlined Multatuli’s anarchist tendencies philosophically. According to Beekman, Multatuli does not have a joint plan, program or policy. It would go against his romantic plot. Like Byron, Multatuli was a stubborn rebel, against any system, be it government, church, or social conventions. He admired Voltaire precisely because he had no system. Multatuli writes: “Voltaire was a non-entity in the eyes of the followers of Kant, Hegel, Spinoza, Descartes and Leibnitz..... Why? Because he didn’t say anything that everyone couldn’t understand, and because he didn’t incorporate systems...”¹⁵

A similar impression, in a different way, was justified by Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis in his memoir, *Van Christen tot Anarchist* (1910). Domela was a priest, turned into a fierce atheist but ironically appeared as a savior for the Dutch workers due to his good organizational skills when he decided to become a socialist. In the Dutch press, he is often illustrated as Jesus. In 1888, he was elected as a member of the parliament and became a vocal representative for the voices of labor, the abolition of child labor and forced shopping, suffrage for women, the

¹⁴ Kornelis ter Laan. *Multatuli Encyclopedie* (1995), pg 21.

¹⁵ Multatuli. *Max Havelaar, or, The coffee auctions of the Dutch Trading Company* (1982), pg 368-369.

reform of the Kingdom of the Netherlands into a republic, and even the independence of the Indonesian colony from the Netherlands several decades before the Indonesian intellectual class was formed!

Gradually, he began to feel that parliamentary activity was futile and his interest in anarchism grew. Domela had written letters to Multatuli but it was not until 1886 that they met face to face. Multatuli expressed disapproval of socialism, but he sympathized with Domela’s persistence in struggle. Years later when Multatuli had died and Domela openly declared himself an anarchist, Multatuli’s wife said to Domela, “you will understand each other better now!”¹⁶

According to Domela, Multatuli’s fault was that he only recognized one current in socialism, which relates to discipline, rules and parliament. “However, had he known anarchy, that is, freedom-loving socialism,” wrote Domela, “he would have thought very differently.” In this case, Domela was mistaken. Multatuli had in fact been aware of anarchy earlier. In his letter to John F. Snelleman the same year he met Domela, Multatuli requested that he be sent an article about Peter Kropotkin.¹⁷ It was clear in Multatuli’s eyes that his disapproval of Domela was directed at the view that Domela was a naïve person who believed in policy change and power struggles.

In 2018, I tried to briefly explain Multatuli anarchist tendencies. But only this time I had the opportunity to conduct further research on his writings and correspondence. Of course, in Indonesia, Multatuli is not known as an anarchist (and even then among those who know him) and may remain so for the next few years. The Multatuli that Indonesia knows are still the Multatuli of *Max Havelaar* of the 1860s, not the Multatuli of the last decade of the 1880s. *Max Havelaar* himself was only translated into Indonesian in 1972 by H.B. Jassin, and the version currently in circulation is very badly translated.

Multatuli appealed to me not only because he had anarchist leanings. More than that, I am interested because Multatuli’s radicalization actually happened in his old age. This was true not only of him, but of many of his contemporary socialists, such as Eysinga and Domela, whom I have discussed. I myself openly claimed to be an anarchist at the age of 21, and I was derided (almost as a prophecy) by many that I would change and compromise with the demands of the “system” at the age of 30.

¹⁶ Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis. *Van Christen tot Anarchist* (1910), pg 137.

¹⁷ Multatuli letter to John F. Snelleman dated 30 August 1886. Accessed from: <https://multatuli.online/brieven/datum/brief?j=1886&b=mdb07735>