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Melati van Java. Dochter van Indië

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Summary

There was a time when Melati van Java (1853 – 1927) was a well-known and much-liked name in the Netherlands. Especially around the turn of the century the general public was familiar with her novels, which remained in circulation in various editions for at least a quarter of a century; people read her contributions to newspapers and magazines or knew that she was active in the Roman Catholic women's movement. Literary critics reacted with mixed feelings to her novels, from favourable to sympathetic, to disapproving and cynical, but her novels practically always got attention. In short, Melati van Java (pseudonym of Marie Sloot) was an important factor in the cultural society of the day in the Netherlands. The status she enjoyed at the time contrasts sharply with the regard she has today.

The history of Dutch literature ought to take into account the contemporary view on literature. Anyone who finds the names of authors from that time who were popular or detested – ideally both – finds an abundance of titles that indicates that current historiography shows many gaps. An oeuvre that is judged in accordance with the criteria of that time, can be an important link in the development of literature. By the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century novelist Melati van Java took a prominent position for a few decades. That calls for closer examination. This thesis is a biography. It does not want to be an encyclopedia of a literary juncture. It is not the landscape from that period that will be mapped, but the walker in that landscape and the routes she chose and rejected. While the biography throws light on the individual aspect, it will also show something of the general aspect along with it. Through the interaction the insight originates that, although unique qualities were united in the person of Marie Sloot and in her work, with that combination she seamlessly joined the developments of her time. Thus she was one of the pioneers, to be sure, where it concerned female authors living by their pen, but at the same time she profited from the technological innovations in printing. She also owed her fame to the infrastructure that had arisen by that time, creating more male and female readers: cheap editions, faster transport to sales outlets and electric light that people could read by.

Three lines of approach offered me the analytical instruments to interpret this writer's life and work. They were gender, ethnicity and religion. After all, these three factors were permanently present in her life, although constantly changing in strength and in mutual balance of power, but always linked together. Before going into this any further, I think it is good to give a brief summary of Marie Sloot's life.

On January 13th 1853 Maria Nicolina Christina Sloot was born in Semarang, in the house of her grandfather Christiaan van Haastert (1800 – 1860) and his njai Sajia (1801 – 1871). Her parents were Wiesje van Haastert (1825 – 1873) and teacher Carel Sloot (1826 – 1883) from the Dutch province of Twente. She had a sister Chrisje and a brother Nico. To a large extent Marie was educated at home, apart from a short period with the nuns during leave in the Netherlands and a period with the Ursuline Sisters at Noordwijk, Batavia, in the Dutch East Indies. In 1871 the family repatriated to the Netherlands; they first lived in The Hague and after that in Roermond. In The Hague Marie's grandmother (who had come along) died, and a few years later her mother, in Roermond. Her father's remarriage stimulated Marie to find a place to live in Amsterdam, together with her niece Lina Scheffler (1856 – 1927). Here she displayed an enormous energy and creativity: she wrote novels, girl's books, essays and some plays. She made her debut under the pseudonym of Mathilde and later added 'Melati van Java'. Especially because of her

Indies novels she was invited in 1893 to become a member of De Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde (Society of Dutch Literature) as one of the first women. She certainly was the first Indies woman who wrote one bestseller after another. At an advanced age, under the pseudonym of Max van Ravestein, she wrote harsh novels that criticized Roman Catholicism. During and after the first World War she was very active in the Roman Catholic women's movement. In 1927 Marie Sloot died quite suddenly. A few months later Lina died too.

In the first part of my thesis, entitled *An Indies youth*, I describe the Indies years of Marie Sloot. Here the foundation was laid for her authorship. Chapter four is the beginning of the second part, *The novelist*, in which the development of her literary career is at the centre. The third and last part, *Famous and Forgotten*, is covered by chapters ten till twelve. In this part I show how gradually the emphasis moved from literature to charity.

My first line of approach is that of gender. By gender I mean, following Joan Wallach Scott, the whole of social meanings of sex. It is not the body that – in this case – defines being a woman, but the social expectations, duties, codes and laws. The subordinate position that women had to take up in marriage, something Marie Sloot had seen with her own mother and grandmother, was also the cause that she did not decide to get married. In a marriage like that she would identify herself with the position of a man, as she repeatedly wrote in her letters to the man of letters Jan van der Lans (1855 – 1928). She did not want to be occupied with housekeeping, but she wanted the autonomy of a writer's life. Fortunately Marie Sloot had a faithful life partner in Lina Scheffler, and it is hard to draw a line here between friendly and romantic love, if there was such a line at all.

Marie Sloot witnessed the two great women's exhibitions of her time. The National Exhibition of Women's Labour (1898) emphasized the industrious life of women. The idea was to draw attention in various ways to women and their rights to paid labour, and at the same time to point out abuses. Various lectures and a daily report, which was led by feminist and authoress Johanna W. A. Naber (1859 – 1941), were part of the exhibition. To this daily report Maria Sloot made a contribution on the great amount of work done by the religious sisters in the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies. The Reading Room was in possession of a great number of her novels.

Like many other Roman Catholic women she stayed away from the second exhibition, *The Woman 1813 – 1913*; in their opinion the event had been too much about creating an image of propaganda for women's suffrage. Nevertheless, she followed the developments with attention.

The position of women had the writer's permanent attention, especially the position of Dutch East Indies women.

The second line of approach is that of ethnicity, descent. Marie Sloot was Indies, Indo-European, and she looked like her *peranakan* Chinese grandmother Sajia. She had very strong ties with this grandmother and her Indies mother. The loss of these women made a deep impression on her. Especially the mother-daughter relationship was to be a regularly recurring motif in her Indies novels. In them descent and being a daughter became overlapping quantities, actually emanating from each other; a daughter who renounced her descent, also renounced her mother. Therefore the Indies female characters in the novels 'are not allowed' to do so by the writer; they ought to acknowledge that their mother was Indies, but at the same time they had to adapt themselves to the European

civilization, which was considered to be higher. That recognition reflected the standard of the colonial society in which Marie had grown up. It is exceptional, however, how often and with how much persuasiveness Marie presents girls and women in her novels, who are not only very beautiful, but in particular intelligent and independent. The classic example of this is Theodore van Vaerne in the novel *Fernand* (1878). She declines to marry a good potential husband, because he bores her, she travels on her own between Java and the Netherlands and takes decisions without making herself dependent on a man. The fact that at the end of the novel the writer submits her as yet to the classic moral by making her weak and fall in love, takes little away from her glorious behaviour. It rather pointed to a strategic move of the authoress, who, after all, had to live by her pen and keep her large readership.

My third line of approach of looking at Marie Sloom's work and life is that of religion. She was Roman Catholic and the restrictions which resulted from this, showed at an early age. The ideal for a Roman Catholic girl was to become a wife and mother. Living by your pen, as Marie already wanted as a young girl, was out of bounds. Especially in the early years of her authorship she realized that she fell short of the general Roman Catholic expectations. But there were opportunities too. At the Ursuline Sisters' school she saw unmarried and independent women, intellectually trained. That must have been inspiring; obviously there were acceptable alternatives to the ideal of marriage. And it was also during the first years of her authorship that the Roman Catholic emancipation started. There was a need for literature that was acceptable within their own ranks; that was 'safe' to read and that offered spiritual edification. Marie's novels offered all this. Opportunities and limitations came together in the intensive administrative work that Marie did for and in the Roman Catholic Association of Girls. The general aim was to preserve Roman Catholic girls from the evil of the world and put them on the right track of Roman Catholicism. The limitations that once had been imposed on her, she here imposed on others. And yet there were opportunities here too: Marie and her fellow members of the committee went to brothels and similar locations in order to 'save' these girls and in this way they had a considerable degree of independence and freedom of movement in the name of virtue. The girls for their part will not seldom have been inspired by the way of life of the well-known authoress.

A biography like this one hopes to be an initiative to further biographical investigation, particularly into the things women have written about the Dutch East Indies and about the position of women. This combination is present in a surprisingly militant way in the work of Melati van Java, who as a writer and as herself always was that one thing: a daughter of the Dutch East Indies.