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**Book review : Tineke Hellwig, In the shadow of change: of women in Indonesian literature**

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**Tineke Hellwig, *In the Shadow of Change. Images of Women in Indonesian Literature*. Berkeley, CA: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Monograph No. 35, University of California, 1994., 259 pp.**

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In the field of Indonesian (literary) studies women's voices that speak out on behalf of women's concerns and interests are unfortunately still rare. Tineke Hellwig's book (based on her Ph. D. dissertation at Leiden) is an important step toward deconstructing and decentering male-defined conceptions of reality—starting with men's images of womanhood. The author sees the greater part of her book "*as the first stage of feminist literary criticism: (re) reading and (re) evaluating texts in search of the images of women.*" Her aim is "*to determine how female characters in modern Indonesian literature are portrayed and to what extent this portrayal helps to create a general image of women in Indonesian society,*" (p.1). With her book Hellwig wishes to address or, more precisely, to encourage the resistant reader (male and female alike?) who no longer accepts the predominant gender relations produced by a patriarchal society. Her interpretations of twenty-five Indonesian novels published between 1937 and 1987 depict gender conflicts as they touch upon profession, motherhood, (forced) marriage, and sexuality, and thus upon basic questions of life planning, freedom of choice, identity. The results presented in this book offer insights into the image-producing, affirmative as well as subversive, power of literature.

The novels discussed primarily fulfill two selection criteria: a female protagonist "*had to play a prominent role*" and second, "*the work had to be reasonably known to the Indonesian reading public*" (p. 3). All texts in chapters 2 to 6 are of male authorship (except for Rukiah's *Kejatuhan dan Hati*), while chapter 7 exclusively deals with ten novels by women writers of the 1970s. Regrettably, the prewar female authors—named by Hellwig herself at the end of her book—are not included in the discussion.

Hellwig follows a mainly text-focused method. Consequently each text is introduced with an outline of its plot. The resulting concentration of names, places, and relationships, however, does not always help the reader to follow the author's argumentation. The structural analysis then relates details of the narratorship, focalization, and sequences of narration. Hereby, the author relies extensively on Mieke Bal (1985). In the course of the discussion (of twenty-five texts) Hellwig's approach unfortunately loses its effectiveness, although it does bring up interesting aspects that have not been part of literary studies in and of this region so far. The leading question in the research is indeed a crucial one: Who speaks? Who has a voice? But the conclusions drawn by the author sometimes fall short. The repeated statement that patriarchal norms dominate Indonesian literature (and the rest of society) does not really come as a surprise to the reader. A further limitation of the prose material, and an accordingly close text analysis, might have served also to clarify the argumentation. The different levels of discourse are sometimes difficult to tell apart, as for example in the discussion of the novel *Canting* by Arswendo Atmowiloto. And it is not only here that the fabula/story/text, general information from "secondary sources," and the author's personal and scholarly standpoint get tangled up. Introducing chapter 3 the author announces that apart from the role of women as wives and mothers, morality, marriage and sexual ethics she will "*also consider how women experience and react to rending and shattering changes in society*" (p. 48). But four of the five texts discussed are written by men. Are they supposed to illuminate women's feelings and experiences? Are they treated as historical sources? It is not clear whether Hellwig talks about women's experience or male vision of the same. A

black-and-white picture of “men against women” is prevalent throughout the text which occasionally simplifies the complexity of historic reality and of general cultural aspects, for example with respect to the Javanese shadowplay. On the other hand, important historical data are omitted. In her interpretations of *Layar Terkembang* in chapter 2, Hellwig does not include the fact that the novel in question was written by one of the leading employees of (and actually in his office at) the Dutch colonial publishing house Balai Poestaka. The book’s purpose was, most of all, to represent the Western-bourgeois ideology of the “educated wife and mother” which was fostered and propagated by Balai Poestaka at that time.

Resistance is a struggle that starts off as a doubt mirrored in inconspicuous details, in minor frictions and contradictions. Those contradictions do show in the heroines’ conduct described in the novels as well as in Hellwig’s interpretation and presentation. “*From a feminist perspective, I searched the texts for women who were freed from outside pressure to direct their lives as they wanted, be it as wives and mothers or as career women. I hoped to find women who were able to take full responsibility for their actions and choices,*” (p. 201). The author herself repeatedly gives good reasons why the (male dominated) Indonesian society of the last five decades was not likely to produce such utopian pictures of women’s life. Still, her research does come up with a number of female characters that allow a positive feminist reading beside a conventional one. It is difficult to comprehend, however, for what reason Umar Kayam’s *Sri Sumarah* gets an “A” for taking her life in her own hands and freeing herself from general moral standards by allowing herself to start an affair with a younger man, while Mira W.’s *Airin* “loses all sense of morality in America” (p. 194) by even more consequently following *her* scheme of (a lesbian) life.

It is admittedly difficult to strip off the (scholarly) socialization which seems to reach down to the repeated usage of the misleading term deflowering—less discriminatory expressions are offered by every dictionary. The inclusion of a slightly broader theoretical frame might have prevented the author from basing large parts of her interpretations on the assumption that “*since women are in touch with their inner emotional experiences, they are able to form strong bonds with others. They form their self-identity by means of connections with others and reinforcement from others*” (p. 65; see also p. 144). Some additional work in the field of gender theory would certainly have strengthened the author’s correct, but somewhat shy criticism of the downgrading usage of literary categories, especially with regard to literature produced by women, as is demonstrated in the example of so-called popular literature in chapter 7. Again Hellwig gets unhappily trapped in her own literary socialization when she eventually applies the very same categories in the very same discriminatory way (chapter 7, esp. pp. 163ff; 178).

The great value of this research is undoubtedly its presentation of a different mode of reading, a female one, and an angry one—its strongest point and at the same time its weakest. No “scholarly objectivity” can be pretended in a study like this: emotional involvement is inevitable, for the scholar gets confronted with her own perception of femaleness and the roles that are required from her as a female scholar and woman. The subject matter is the personal everyday experience of being considered an object, being silenced, being the second sex. Although this emotional connectedness with the topic should not cloud one’s eye (which seems to have happened to Hellwig now and then), her study does represent a brave first step toward introducing a new perspective to the studies of Indonesian literature. It is to be hoped that it will encourage other scholars (male or female!) to follow.