

## Oeroeg Was My Friend: The Marginalisation of Native Experience in Dutch Colonial Memory

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Concepts of national identity are being asserted and contested in the Netherlands, just as elsewhere in Europe, in response to issues such as economic migration and increasing pressure to create a unified European identity. One result of this collective soul-searching has been the emergence of approaches to the legacy of the colonial era as an important topic of discussion. As the temporal distance from the colonial era increases and the (for the most part unrealised) potential for eye-witnesses to share their accounts of life during that time is reduced, communities are forced to rely upon cultural artefacts to reinforce and perpetuate their collective memories of events.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the Dutch East Indies, the concurrence of decolonisation with the aftermath of the Second World War and German occupation of the Netherlands meant that many events in the colonies were overshadowed, and therefore questions about the failure of the Dutch colony in the Indies were left unanswered.<sup>2</sup> Criticism of Dutch actions in the colonial era was delayed, thanks to the taboo which surrounded the bloody war fought by the Netherlands in an attempt to regain control of Indonesia, and also the traditional Dutch self-image of justice and

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<sup>1</sup> A. Erll, 'Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction' in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by A. Erll and A. Nünning (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> The Netherlands ruled large parts of the *Nederlands Indië* from 1800 to 1948/9, although the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC)*) had established trading colonies there as early as 1603. The *VOC* controlled much of what is now Indonesia, and the relationship between the two is often compared to that of Britain and India. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Dutch people returned to the Netherlands after the Second World War, fleeing the Indonesian struggle for independence.

honourable behaviour with regard to its colonies.<sup>3</sup> The Dutch East Indies became the nation's 'family secret', a collective blind spot which was not spoken about.<sup>4</sup> This being the case, many of the cultural artefacts that have formed the basis for collective memories of the colonial era in the Netherlands focus on (generally positive) Dutch personal experiences of the Indies and marginalise the experience of the colonised. Despite calls for more openness with regard to the colonial war in the 1960s, Dutch discourse on the colonies continues to be marked by nostalgic remembrances of the pre-World War Two period.

This article will explore some of the current thinking surrounding colonial memory and examine the tensions in Dutch remembrances of the East Indies through the prism of one of the better-known artefacts of the late period of Dutch colonialism. By doing this, I will draw conclusions about whether progress is being made in the Netherlands towards a mode of colonial remembering that can accommodate the experience of the colonised as well as the coloniser. The artefact that I will use is the novel *Oeroeg* (1948), written by Hella S. Haasse, and the film adaptation of the same work, produced by Hans Hylkema in 1993. I will also take into account some aspects of the political debates surrounding decolonisation and approaches to colonial memory in order to judge whether a shift is taking place beyond the literary arena.

Published in 1948, *Oeroeg* is a first-person-narrated short novel comprising the memories of a nameless Dutch-Indonesian man who returns to Indonesia after the Second World War. The Indonesia he finds upon his return is in the midst of the struggle for independence, with nationalist paramilitary organisations at war with the

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<sup>3</sup> The Dutch government adopted an 'ethical policy' for its East Indies colony in 1900, promoting education and better treatment for native colonists.

<sup>4</sup> P. Pattynama, 'The Colonial Past in the Postcolonial Present: Cultural Memory, Gender, and Race in Dutch Cinema', in *Migrant Cartographies. New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Post-Colonial Europe*, ed. by S. Ponzanesi and D. Merolla (Oxford: Lexington, 2005), p. 240.

Dutch Colonial Army (*Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger*). Although not directly involved in the violence, the narrator has the task of reconstructing bridges destroyed by those he refers to as ‘the republicans’, and is shocked by the destruction that has taken place. The aftermath of the war and the impact of the so-called ‘*politioenele acties*’ (police actions), the euphemistically described war in which the Dutch government attempted to regain control of their former colony, are alluded to only very briefly, with the primary focus of the text being the childhood idyll of growing up in Indonesia and the narrator’s friendship with the eponymous Oeroeg.

Oeroeg is a native Indonesian boy with whom the Dutch narrator spends a great deal of time as a child. Through the eyes of the narrator, a picture is painted of an affectionate relationship between the two boys, one that begins with their mothers’ shared experience of pregnancy, but is later challenged by their differing circumstances as they grow older. Oeroeg is initially barred from going to school because of his background, and the narrator’s father blames the boys’ friendship for his son’s poor command of Dutch. However, following the death of Oeroeg’s father in an accident during an evening swimming excursion, and the departure of the narrator’s mother following an extramarital affair, the two boys are allowed to remain companions. They continue their schooling together and move to Batavia for further education.

Once there, however, the boys gradually grow apart as a result of their differing experiences, and Oeroeg eventually becomes involved in Indonesian nationalism, leaving the hurt and bewildered narrator trying to establish why their relationship was ending. His attempts to interpret the reasons for Oeroeg turning away from him mirror those of the Dutch to come to terms with the severing of the connection between the Netherlands and Indonesia, their colonial ‘younger brother’.

The narrator's unadorned account of his efforts to understand and re-establish contact with Oeroeg, in what ends up as an elegy to their innocent friendship, has proven its capacity to affect the reader since it was first published, and the novel can be found on the bookshelf of most Dutch families.

*Oeroeg* was the first free book given away to readers during the Netherlands' annual book week, and remains the most successful of these '*Boekenweekgeschenken*' ('book week gifts') to date. Since 1948 there have been over 50 editions printed and *Oeroeg* has become an integral part of the curriculum in Dutch schools and universities. Despite its popularity, people have pointed out problematic aspects of *Oeroeg* from the outset. In 1948, the critic Tjalie Robinson condemned *Oeroeg* for being pessimistic about the Dutch-Indonesian relationship, and criticised Haasse for being irresponsible in her representation of the relationship between the Netherlands and its colony:

If these desperate and pessimistic ideas [the narrator's questioning of whether he ever knew Oeroeg or whether he is forever exiled from the land of his birth] are supposed to reflect the thoughts of a Dutch boy, even one who has shared an intimate relationship with an Indonesian boy, then we might as well say all is lost for the relationship between the Dutch and the Indonesians.<sup>5</sup>

Robinson also attacked Haasse for being unrealistic in her representation of friendship. He said that the relationship between the boys and its subsequent disintegration would not take place as Haasse described. In his opinion, the hostility

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<sup>5</sup> A. Helsloot, 'Reflections in a Post-Colonial Mirror: A Comparative Analysis of Hella Haasse's *Oeroeg* (1948) and *Sleuteloog* (2002)' (Master's Thesis, Universiteit Utrecht, 2007), p. 7. Accessible via <http://igitur-archive.library.uu.nl/student-theses/2007-0628-201543/UUindex.html> [accessed 14/06/2012].

that Haasse describes between the Dutch and Indonesian boys never happened, and her suggestion that such things were ever said or thought was slanderous.<sup>6</sup>

The second of these charges – that *Oeroeg* distorts the truth of the Dutch-Indonesian colonial relationship – is one that has reappeared in subsequent criticisms of the text, for various reasons. In the 1970s Robinson's assessment of *Oeroeg* sparked a debate involving such prominent critics as Rob Nieuwenhuys about whether Haasse could understand the Indies, alleging that she was an outsider because of her Dutch heritage. He argued that Haasse had not spent enough of her life in Indonesia to understand the country or be justified in writing as an 'Indies' author.<sup>7</sup> This argument about the 'right to speak' surfaced again in the 1990s and 2000s, with accusations of racism aimed at Robinson, most notably by Rudy Kousbroek, who declared that Robinson was refusing Haasse's right to speak about the Indies because she was 'totok' (racially Dutch-European), rather than 'indo' (mixed-heritage). Haasse herself would explore the question of how well she knew the Indies, and the origins of her motivations for writing about them, for the rest of her life. She seems to admit in her autobiography *Zelfportret als Legkaart* (Self-portrait as a Jigsaw) (1952) that she probably wrote *Oeroeg* in order to feel part of the colony, a life she said she never really knew.<sup>8</sup>

While Robinson thought that what he saw as Haasse's inaccuracy was dangerously irresponsible, because it might mislead readers and sour the relationship between the Netherlands and Indonesia, later critics have identified other dangers in her portrayal of the Indies and of *Oeroeg* that owe a great deal to postcolonial studies. Primary among these are the idealised portrayal of life in Indonesia as shown from the

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<sup>6</sup> T. Robinson, 'Nogmals *Oeroeg*', *Oriëntatie* (June 1948) cited in Helsloot, p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> R. Nieuwenhuys, *Mirror of the Indies: A History of Dutch Colonial Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), p. 301.

<sup>8</sup> Helsloot, 'Reflections', p. 23.

point of view of the narrator, the choice of a single narrative perspective (that of a privileged Dutch boy), and the mostly silent appearances of Oeroeg himself.

In *Oeroeg*, the narrator remembers the boys' friendship and the life they shared, but seldom mentions Oeroeg's feelings or opinions about any of the events that take place. He demonstrates a wide-eyed acceptance of the status quo and of the differences between them, such as Oeroeg washing in the well while the narrator bathes indoors after their daily return from school, or Oeroeg going barefoot while he wears shoes.<sup>9</sup> This is typical of a certain style of colonial literature that critics such as Sarah de Mul have identified as distorting the realities of colonialism, 'divert[ing] attention from the harsh living conditions of the local population which provided the foundations on which a privileged childhood rested, [through] the focus on the personal and the sentimental.'<sup>10</sup> Hierarchical differences between the boys are normalised by the choice of a narrator who is innocent of the implications that these differences have.

The narrator also fails to reflect on the reasons behind things that puzzle him, such as why Oeroeg might be slower to learn to read than he is, or, later on, why he feels drawn to the cause of Indonesian independence.<sup>11</sup> When, towards the end of the novel, the now almost adult characters meet, their estrangement is emphasised by the fact that Oeroeg is more vocal than at any other time in the text. The narrator can no longer speak for his friend because he can no longer assume that the views they share are the same, a change which mirrors the breaking point of the 'police actions'. After that watershed the myth of colonised Indonesians' contentedness and the benefits to

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<sup>9</sup> H. S. Haasse, *Oeroeg*, 48<sup>th</sup> edition (Amsterdam: CPNB t.g.v. Nederland leest, 2009), p. 31 [Originally published Amsterdam: Querido, 1948]. Translations are my own.

<sup>10</sup> S. De Mul, 'Nostalgia for empire: "Tempo doeloe" in contemporary Dutch literature', *Memory Studies*, 3.4 (2010), p. 424

<sup>11</sup> *Oeroeg*, p. 32.

the native population of Dutch rule in the East Indies could no longer be effectively perpetuated by the Dutch government.

The narrator had first been confronted by his friend's critical views of the colonial government in the letters Oeroeg sends to their landlady Lida after he moves to Surabaya, but could not accept that Oeroeg had written them, or that they were genuinely his views and not those of someone else, that he was repeating.<sup>12</sup> However the narrator is forced to accept the change in Oeroeg when they speak in person:

“What do you mean?” I asked Oeroeg.

“That I don't want to lift a finger for the Dutch government”, he answered bluntly. “I don't need your help.”

“Your help?” I said, as the blood rose into my head, because now the meaning of his words struck home.<sup>13</sup>

Although the trauma of being confronted with his friend's apparently transformed personality is intense for the narrator and leaves him questioning their friendship years later, he is not made insecure in his view of colonialism, even while Oeroeg berates him.

I knew little or nothing of the nationalist movements, of the wild schools, of the process of fermentation that was taking place in certain areas of society. I listened in silence to the deluge of accusations and reproaches that Oeroeg and Abdullah, only now fully inflamed, aimed at the government, against the Dutch, against whites in general. I believed that many of their allegations were ill-

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<sup>12</sup> *Oeroeg*, p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> *Oeroeg*, p. 95.

founded or unjust but I was not in possession of the arguments with which to refute them.<sup>14</sup>

The narrator's ignorance and bemusement can be read as wilful or as borne out of complacency, but neither excuses his detachedness from the situation. His vague sense that he is right and the nationalist cause wrong lies in stark contrast to his opponents' certitude and passion, and demonstrates his weakness. His instinctive feeling that they are wrong, which persists despite his non-comprehension of their arguments, makes him appear condescending.

There is also an implication in the text that Oeroeg has turned to the nationalist cause out of bitterness because of his repeated rejection by white society.<sup>15</sup> The narrator relates how Oeroeg followed him to lessons with his tutor, held ambitions of becoming an engineer which were met with scorn, and failed to 'pass' as a mixed-race *indo* boy. This reduces the Indonesian struggle to that of a petulant child, lashing out at its older brother as it is embarrassed by its failure to emulate him or be allowed to join in his games.

The choice of one perspective and the exclusion of another are problematic in light of the place of the two characters within the social hierarchy of the colony, and the imbalance of power that can be read as being reproduced in the silencing of Oeroeg by the narrator. Salman Rushdie wrote about this phenomenon in relation to the British colonial past and representations of the Raj era in India, claiming that Indian people are under-represented in films about the Raj and thus reduced to being

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<sup>14</sup> Oeroeg, p. 95. 'Wilde scholen' ('wild schools') were unsubsidised schools set up by Indonesians dissatisfied with the limited number of school places for Indonesian children. Often founded by political and religious groups, they were attacked by the Dutch government in the early 1930s, leading to a storm of protest.

<sup>15</sup> S. Rushdie, 'The Raj Revival', *Observer*, 1 April 1984, p. 19, cited in De Mul, 'Nostalgia for empire', pp. 414-5.



‘bit-players’ in their own history, even decades after independence.<sup>16</sup> Although some critics, such as Rosemarie Buikema, subscribe to the view that Haasse creates a space in which the reader can sense a ‘gap’ and is led to reflect on the experience of the indigenous population, the text is also justifiably interpreted as a potential glossing-over of Indonesian experiences of colonialism.<sup>17</sup> Oeroeg’s silence risks serving as a reproduction of the silence of the Indonesian subject within the colonial discourse, and the obvious love felt by the narrator for Oeroeg does not diminish the fact that he is controlling his friend through the mediation of his feelings.

Any straightforwardly positive view of Dutch activities in the colonies was essentially dispelled in the 1960s in light of calls to expose Dutch atrocities during the two so-called ‘police actions’ in 1947-48, which were fought to prevent Indonesia gaining independence.<sup>18</sup> Physiologist J. E. Hueting broke the silence when he called for an inquiry into war crimes committed by Dutch soldiers in his dissertation; finally initiating a public discussion of the colonial past.<sup>19</sup> *Oeroeg* had remained a popular text, regarded as apolitical, realistically affectionate and unrelated to the scandal at the time, but the rise of post-colonial studies and the increasing temporal distance from decolonisation were to contribute to a challenging of this judgement of the book as time passed. Colonialism came to be seen as a time of inequality, in which the Netherlands had not behaved with the much-lauded ‘Christian compassion’, which was previously seen as the defining element of Dutch colonial policy, and which had

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<sup>16</sup> De Mul, ‘Nostalgia for empire’, p. 415.

<sup>17</sup> R. Buikema ‘De coloniale verbeelding van Hella Haasse’, *Surplus*, 10.6, 1996, p. 9, cited in Hellsloot, p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> P. Baehr, ‘Colonialism, Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Dutch perspective’, *Age of Apology: Facing up to the Past*, in M. Gibney et al. (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2008), p. 231.

<sup>19</sup> Pattynama, p. 240.

been attributed to the nation's adoption of an ethical policy of government to the East Indies in 1900.<sup>20</sup>

In 1993 a film was made of *Oeroeg* by Dutch director Hans Hylkema, which responded to the change in mood with regard to colonialism. The postcolonial critic Pamela Pattynama identifies the film *Oeroeg* as one of the few Dutch movies made about the colonial era alongside *Max Havelaar* (1973) and *Gordel van Smaragd (Belt of Emerald)* (1997).<sup>21</sup> Changes made to the original plot seem to seek to correct the most problematic elements of the original and introduce the negative sides of colonialism, creating 'an entirely different effect and meaning'.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the most obvious of the plot changes surround Oeroeg's father, Deppoh, who originally drowned whilst saving the life of the narrator during a night-time swimming expedition at the Telaga Hideung lake. Although the narrator feels guilty about what happened to Deppoh, the fact that the narrator and his family inadvertently caused the death of his best friend's father does not draw a significant reaction from the characters. The only external response to Deppoh's death is the decision on the part of the narrator's father's to pay for Oeroeg's education (while his family are expelled from servants' quarters and sent to live in poverty). In the film, the narrator (Johan) is tormented by guilt and suspects that Oeroeg has sought revenge on him by killing his own father, who is found murdered at the start of the action.<sup>23</sup> Unlike at the end of the book, where the narrator encounters someone he believes to be Oeroeg at the Telaga Hideung but does not speak to him, the film concludes with a dialogue between Oeroeg and Johan. Oeroeg reveals that Deppoh died because he had

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<sup>20</sup> Baehr, 'Colonialism, Slavery and the Slave Trade', p. 230.

<sup>21</sup> Pattynama, p. 241.

<sup>22</sup> Pattynama, p. 243.

<sup>23</sup> In the book, the narrator's father dies during the war.

been sent back into the lake to find Johan's father's watch, which Johan hands over in a symbolic act of apology.

The revelation that Deppoh died after being ordered to retrieve a piece of jewellery transforms the event, from one in which the Dutch adults were responsible for his death because of their reckless behaviour whilst swimming, into one where they demonstrate their disregard for his life by prioritising their property over his safety. Johan's symbolic return of the watch can be read as an attempt to make amends by distancing himself from the material concerns which drove his parents. The film exposes the material heart of colonialism and coloniser-colonised relationships in a way that the book does not, and removes the possibility of the colonial system being portrayed as innocent.

The text's retreat into memories of childhood, that present an uncritical picture of colonialism where 'hierarchies between colonised and colonisers [are] left unproblematised and portrayed as a normal and natural state of affairs', is also challenged in the film by the naming of the narrator as Johan, a colonial soldier, and the inclusion of the colonial war.<sup>24</sup> Images of cruelty by soldiers on both sides of the conflict, as well as Dutch soldiers torturing Indonesian guerrillas, are interspersed among the scenes in order to give an idea of the context in which Haasse was writing and explore perhaps the most willingly forgotten era of Dutch history. Pattinama argues that by doing this the film creates a shift, temporarily jarring the Dutch viewer out of the traditional self-image of victim (of the Nazis and, to a lesser extent, the Japanese) and into one of perpetrator.<sup>25</sup>

Flashbacks are used to disrupt the narrative and to heighten the sense of subjectivity in the film, making the narrative perspective seem less complete and

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<sup>24</sup> De Mul, 'Nostalgia for empire', p. 423.

<sup>25</sup> Pattinama, p. 243.

juxtaposing scenes of childhood with images of horror which destroy the illusion of a paradisiacal era of innocence. The domination of one people by another is placed alongside the consequences of this subjugation, foreshadowing the collapse of the artificially maintained comfort in which the narrator lived as a child. The end of Dutch colonial rule in the East Indies was seen as a tragic loss in the Netherlands, but one precipitated by world events rather than Dutch actions. *Oeroeg* (1993) refuses the audience the comfort of retreating into the pre-war view of the East Indies and ignoring the violence of the decolonisation process.

However, the film could be said to have failed in a holistic reassessment or representation of *Oeroeg* in that the story remains focused through the eyes of a white coloniser and does not represent Oeroeg's perspective of his and the narrator's childhood friendship. Pattynama states that 'the memorised past in *Oeroeg* [...] invokes a nostalgia for an innocent past in which interracial bonding beyond racial divisions was possible. Such innocence, however, never existed'.<sup>26</sup> She also argues that the apparent reconciliation between Oeroeg and Johan, which takes place when they exchange the watch, is a happy ending that masks Johan's failed quest for understanding and knowledge (of the reasons behind the Indonesian fight for independence and the break-down of the colonial relationship).<sup>27</sup> Probably the most informed line of the film's dialogue is voiced by the invented character of Oeroeg's sister, who says 'your memories may be different from ours', thereby encapsulating the central problem of cultural memories of colonialism: the points of view of coloniser and colonised cannot be brought into agreement.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> P. Pattynama, 'Memories of Interracial Contacts and Mixed Race in Dutch Cinema', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 28.1 (2007), p. 75.

<sup>27</sup> Pattynama (2005), p. 247.

<sup>28</sup> Pattynama (2005), p. 244.

Recently, there has been some concern that European nations are glossing over the inequality and exploitation of colonialism in favour of focussing on the intrepid spirit of their forefathers. This tendency has been described by cultural theorist Paul Gilroy as ‘postimperial melancholia’: the employment of nostalgia for past greatness as compensation for present-day failure.<sup>29</sup> In 2007 the Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende gave a speech about the need to return to the enterprising mentality of the East India Company, a reference which appears insensitive in light of how the East India Company conducted its business at certain times.<sup>30</sup> The phrase ‘daar hebben wij wat groots verricht’ (we did something great over there) expresses pride in the labour involved in setting up an overseas empire, but does not address any of the negative sides of that enterprise. The troubled nature of the colonial past is still not fully integrated into the historiography of the Dutch nation and the self-identity created through the colonial enterprise remain central to continuing discussions about the concept of the Dutch nation and national identity.<sup>31</sup>

In the 2000s, *Oeroeg*’s progress as one of the most important artefacts of Dutch cultural memory regarding colonialism has once again become an indicator of the mood of the time. The text was made the free book for the programme *Nederland leest* (The Netherlands Reads) in 2009, a project that seeks to stimulate public interest in a particular book for a few weeks each autumn. It is modelled on similar projects in the USA such as ‘One Book, One City’ and, like them, explicitly chooses texts that are considered controversial.<sup>32</sup> The Netherlands Reads has included texts from

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<sup>29</sup> P. Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 98, cited in De Mul, p. 415.

<sup>30</sup> The ‘police actions’ took place between 25th July and 5th August 1947, and 19th December 1948 and 5th January 1949 on the islands of Java and Sumatra. *Oeroeg* was published in the period between the two campaigns.

<sup>31</sup> Pattynama (2005), p. 240; De Mul, p. 425.

<sup>32</sup> The first book selected by ‘One Book, One City’ was Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

throughout the twentieth century on topics as diverse as the rejection of homosexual children by their parents, slavery, the loneliness of old age, and war crimes. The choice of *Oeroeg* in 2009 highlights it as a text that continues to be contested and of which Dutch people have differing opinions. The potential for a popular post-colonial interpretation of the text in light of changing perspectives on colonialism and an increase in corrective histories of the Indies, such as Gras Boosma's 1992 historical novel *The Last Typhoon*, which compares the Dutch army's actions in the immediate post-war *bersiap* period with those of the SS, may have had an impact on its selection. During the scheme, nearly one million copies of *Oeroeg* were given away.

Over the past few years there has been a boom in the study of the colonial past, and particularly colonial nostalgia. Books, theses, and events, such as the Colloquium on Colonial Nostalgia held at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam in March 2011, mark the emergence of a growing debate about the nature of colonial remembrance. More recently there have been television documentaries about slavery and the colonial past on major Dutch television channels, and academics such as Paul Bijl, who has published on the nostalgic mood that still surrounds colonialism in the Netherlands, have been the subject of articles in newspapers as populist as *De Telegraaf*.<sup>33</sup>

Speaking in 2007, Pamela Pattynama said that the 1993 film of *Oeroeg*, 'participate[s] in the never-ending process of negotiations and contestation that organises Dutch memory on the colonial past'.<sup>34</sup> Television programmes and projects such as *The Netherlands Reads* engender debate on similar issues, performing an important function by attempting to articulate and thereby interrogate collective images of the past which often reside outside public discussion. The fact that literature

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<sup>33</sup> 'Nederland kan koloniaal verleden niet sluiten', *De Telegraaf*, 15 December 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Pattynama (2007), p. 78.

and film provide such an effective entry into these debates highlights their importance as artefacts which determine the remembrance of the past. As the German cultural memory expert Astrid Erll writes, ‘fictionalised media [...] are characterised by their power to shape the collective imagination [...] [creating] images of the past which resonate with cultural memory’.<sup>35</sup> For *Oeroeg*, this has been predominantly an image of innocence and bewildered loss, but the partial pushing to the fore of the ‘gaps’ which Buikema identified in the text through the film and the invitation to debate made by The Netherlands Reads, are beginning to change the book’s meaning within the Dutch collective consciousness. That an interest in colonial nostalgia and the interrogation of personal feelings towards colonialism are being brought to stand alongside national guilt, and European colonialism, in public discussions about Dutch self-identity more generally, suggests another development in a debate that is unlikely ever to end. De Mul describes the current attempt to come to terms with the colonial past as a competition between sweet reminiscences and the knowledge of racist exploitation and indigenous suffering.<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly, this debate does not seem to be one which includes the Netherlands’ former colonial subjects. The issue of apology and reparations makes the absence of voices from the former East Indies especially clear. During the run up to Queen Beatrix’s visit to Indonesia in 1995, vocal calls for her to apologise for Dutch actions in the Indies which were heard within the Netherlands found no support in Indonesia itself.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, in 2000, when Prime Minister Wim Kok announced his intention to apologise for the excesses of the Dutch colonial era, the Indonesian

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<sup>35</sup> Erll, p. 389.

<sup>36</sup> S. De Mul, *Colonial Memory. Contemporary Women’s Travel Writing in Britain and the Netherlands*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), p. 46.

<sup>37</sup> Baehr, p. 232.

government let it be known that it did not need such an apology.<sup>38</sup> The fact that Indonesia has never demanded an apology for the colonial era has further contributed to the Netherlands failure to take responsibility for its past actions.<sup>39</sup>

Given the career of *Oeroeg* and the concerns people have raised about the text, it is somewhat surprising to learn that it was only translated into Bahasa Indonesia in 2009.<sup>40</sup> Although Dutch was spoken in Indonesia by elite social groups, and Indonesians were undoubtedly able to access the text in other languages such as English, the lack of effort on the part of the Dutch literary establishment pre-2009 to initiate a dialogue about the text speaks greatly about the nature of colonial remembrance.<sup>41</sup> The debate over the appropriateness of *Oeroeg* has taken place primarily in the Dutch language sphere, without reference to Indonesian perspectives. Thus it would appear that despite a shift towards imagining or discussing the possible experience of the colonised subject in relation to colonial memory of the East Indies, the Dutch are still talking to themselves.

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<sup>38</sup> Wim Kok never did apologise, because of concern for implicitly demonising the actions of Dutch people who were given the jobs they carried out by their government and devaluing veterans' contributions. Baehr, 'Colonialism, Slavery and the Slave Trade', p. 234.

<sup>39</sup> R. Raben, 'De getuigen in de geschiedenis. De Japanse bezetting van Indonesië tussen ervaring en beeld' in *Nederlanders Japaners Indonesiërs. Een opmerkelijke tentoonstelling*, in E. Somers and S. Rijpma eds (Zwolle and Amsterdam: Waanders Uitgevers/Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogdocumentatie (NIOD), 2002), pp. 18-25 cited in Pattynama, 'The Colonial Past in the Post-colonial Present', p. 247.

<sup>40</sup> This translation was part of the 'The Netherlands Reads' project; Bahasa Indonesia is a form of Malay which is the official language of Indonesia and has nearly twenty three million native speakers.

<sup>41</sup> The 2009 version of *Oeroeg* appears to have become a popular topic on Indonesian literature websites.