
COMMENTARY: FLUNKY + MAID (DJONGOS + BABU)

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The family of these slaves were slaves by blood ever since the coming of certain Europeans. Not before. Their slavishness is coterminous with the presence of the Dutch. Their genealogy begins only with their slavery. They are only known, only recognized, from the moment that their primal father is registered in the "big book" with Latin script. Where his own name might have appeared in the text there are only ellipses. It is not his name that is important, but his rank, "inlandsch sergeant," "native sergeant," which binds a "native" to a Dutch rank. Tracing descent ordinarily means tracing the path of a series of legitimacies, the marriages which are the points on family trees where new branches, new families emerge, and where individuals are identified by relations of kinship. But here individuals take on identity only in relation to something Dutch, an institution, and not even always someone Dutch.

There is, nonetheless, "descent," which in Indonesian, as in English, means also "decline." "Decline" as the history of repeated illegitimacies which bind this "family" (the term is as much biological as cultural here) again and again to the Dutch. But not always in the same way. "Descent," in the second sense, means tracing the changing modes of one's relation to Dutch. What begins as the work of soldiers declines into a relation involving servants. But not exactly servants either, since descent, decline, makes more and more apparent the slavish quality which started back as far as one can know when Houtman sailed to the archipelago (at the end of the sixteenth century, before the flowering of colonialism). Not exactly servants because while Sobi and Inah are servants and are paid, Inah's desire is to be a *njai*, a "housekeeper," as the Dutch sometimes translated the word, while Sobi's is to be the male equivalent. What is more, the *njai* envisioned in this story do not exactly correspond with the *njai* as we might have seen them described in certain Dutch accounts at the turn of the century. The *njai*

in Francis's story "Njai Dasima" worked.¹ She did not get a salary, but rather her needs fulfilled. In exchange she kept track of the accounts, ran the household and had and raised their child. It was domestic exchange that resulted, in Francis's picture, in the construction of a family. In Pramoedya's story, the *njai* is the lowest point of slavery. There is no exchange of services for money; there is only submission. One wants to say: submission in return for something. For the luxury Sobi and Inah dream about; for blue eyes. But these of course are their dreams and are not part of a bargain, even an implicit one, with the *tuan* who arrives in the final paragraphs. Nor are blue-eyed children or automobiles, as Sobi and Inah speak of them, exactly possessions. In place of earnings, Sobi and Inah dream of signs of their slavery. In place of exchange, they dream of getting something from a certain source, a source called "Dutch." Submission willingly entered into in the hope of getting something later might be the result of mere extortion. But one who extorts usually then leaves his victim. Here there is no question of getting and leaving. Sobi and Inah dream of a permanent and defining relation in which what they acquire communicates their status as the possessed. Even when Dolly thought of turning her gain into marriage, she could not successfully do so; she could only start over again as servant and *njai*.

Even slavery however is not a concept wholly adequate to designate what Inah, Sobi, Dolly, and their ancestors hoped for. A slave is the legal property of another. But the "*njai*" were never even granted legal status. The relation existed in the Indies as a permitted form so long as it remained outside the attention of Dutch society in Holland. The word designated something between a commercial and a domestic relation, thus not wholly reducible to prostitution, domestic service, or legal domesticity. The prospective *njai* whose story Pramoedya set during the revolution in the Jakarta of 1948, when Jakarta was in the hands of the Dutch and Pramoedya was their prisoner, of course was not protected by local public opinion. But Pramoedya does not condemn the *njai* as a collaborator, the way, for instance, some liberated Frenchmen after World War II condemned women for their relations with Germans. He rather illuminates the bond which held Indonesians to Dutch. The slavery of which Pramoedya speaks is a state of submission to a dominating influence. But the fictional exposure of this state does not include a detailed picture of the Dutch who, indeed, appear in very few of the marvelous series of tales Pramoedya wrote during the revolution. It appears rather in the author's portrayals of the quality of the slave.

Sobi and Inah hope to win a place as slaves; their weapon is their attractiveness. But their attractiveness is, in their view, measured by the qualities they have which are of European origin. Because her mother had only a fifty percent share in her, Inah has blue eyes and a pointed nose and light skin. It is of course exactly these attributes that she thinks will win her a *tuan*. And Sobi's dreams rest on being able to sing "yua olwees in mai haat." Sobi of course does not know Dutch, much less English. The words are all the more magical to him for this reason. It is not merely that his knowledge of these sounding phrases sets him apart from most other Indonesians; it is that the untranslated words have a magical quality. They have an effect which transcends their meaning, their sense. Whenever he sings them, Miss Mari (the name is not an accident: "*mari*" is a word of invitation in Indonesian) wants a massage. Inah,

¹ G. Francis, "Njai Dasima," in *Tempo Doeloe*, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, ed. (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 1982), pp. 223-247. First published in 1896 (Betawi: Kho Tjeng Bie & Co.).

when she evaluates her looks in the mirror, tells herself that she is pretty, and, looking more closely, says "In a little while you will be Dutch." Precisely her Dutch-like looks, which were passed down, descended from Dutch men, will attract a *tuan* to her, and she will be Dutch.

We see the construction of a fetish, a magical weapon. Foreign words and foreign appearance work the same way. They are endowed with the capacity to evoke recognition of the singer, the Dutch look-alike. And the effect of recognition is the transformation of identity. They, the fetishists, will become Dutch. But not everything foreign, not even everything Dutch, is magical. The foreignness Inah and Sobi possess that is magical they possess only in an incomplete and even in an illegal fashion. Legitimate descent would mean that Inah would already be Dutch and that her facial features would be irrelevant in determining her nationality. Illegitimate descent means that her features still belong in her own view to the nationality she wants to attract and to which she wants to belong. The source of her longing and thus of her belief in magic resides in this situation: she has something that is nonetheless not fully hers. She wants what she already has, in the sense that her looks tell her she is already Dutch and yet she is not. Sobi too, with his song whose words he cannot fully comprehend, has something from the world to which he wants to belong. His singing of the words should show that they are his; they come from within him. And yet, as he says, he wants to learn the languages.

In the Japanese period, Dolly believes a baby with Japanese eyes would be beautiful. She changes her mind when the Dutch return. It is, of course, political power that determines what looks are desirable. But actual political force is insufficient to generate the fetish. The fetish is constructed around foreignness. It depends not on political power as such, but on investing Dutch or Japanese attributes with a signification in excess of what they would mean to Dutch or Japanese. It retains the foreign as foreign and yet with the promise of possession of it. It starts, in fact, with the name in the Dutch register: a name that is only a Dutch title and is written unaccompanied by a Dutch or Indonesian name. It starts with slavishness because slavishness means the acceptance of Dutch recognition as something desired; it takes what the Dutch say about oneself as definitive. It is not, however, that the Dutch, here, say, "You are Indonesian and Indonesians are inferior, fit only to be slaves." It is rather that their recognition consists in applying a Dutch term, "inlandsch sergeant," to the original "father" of this family; the first in the register of ancestors takes that in place of his name. Those who follow equally desire the Dutch to endow them with a title.

From the time of the sergeant, the fetish is reconformed. The astonishing effect of illness is beauty. Following her illness, Kotek (the name means "to cackle" and "a plumed tail") is surprised to find herself addressed as "*njai*." She only discovers what the word *njai* means, and comes to appreciate her own attractiveness to Europeans, later. We see the moment someone believes that someone else knows something more about herself, about her looks, than she does herself, and she accepts their judgement, this is a revelation of identity. She is as she is called; we could say, as she is renamed. It is a further moment of decline, the result of illness. "From the time of the first sergeant, the faces of everyone in the family were awful." Pramoedya adds in the next sentence, "they never changed." Change comes with tuberculosis. It is a corruption of the body that results in this family becoming attractive to Dutch. But the result is that, from the

next generation downward, in their flesh they become part Dutch. And with that there is a change of name: "Rodinah" becomes "Dolly" as the Dutchman sees something in her he can name in his own language. And with this comes another change.

The fetish that compels recognition depends on someone knowing about something within "me" that I did not know I had and making me think it might be possible to have a new identity. Accidentally—the accident might be tuberculosis—I achieved a certain appearance. Then I take it as a property of myself which can be used to attract recognition and legal affirmation. With Dolly we see calculation; not only the Russians have a five year plan. Dolly and her children know what their assets are and therefore know how to make use of them. Accident drops out of the picture, as they are aware of what they will be recognized for. Precisely they know that they are potential foreigners from the point of view of Indonesians. The foreign is theirs and is their asset. But they need to make use of it to fully possess it.

It may seem as if Pramoedya's exposure of the fetish implies a wish to expel the foreign, all the more so since the story was written while, during the revolution, Pramoedya was a prisoner of the Dutch. But one should examine this matter with care. The political difficulties in this story result from attempts to claim the foreign for oneself by winning the recognition of those who *are* foreign and who originally, inadvertently, granted a few of their qualities to their descendants. It is the retention of the foreign as one's own, a retention which, finally, constitutes the denial of its very foreignness, against which the narrator sets his own interpretation of the story. The final paragraph resets the context in a surprising way. This is not a story of the slaves of the Dutch, as one had thought all along. It is a story of "the secrets between men and women which are not secrets." That is, it is a story of men and women everywhere. It only appears to be a story peculiar to Dutch colonialism. As a story of men and women, the tale is well known. But this does not stop it from happening over and over again, each time as though it were a unique event. "How simple life is. As simple as this: people are hungry, they eat, they are satisfied, and they defecate." Does not the satisfaction of eating conceal, make a secret, of what follows? That is, even the most thorough assimilation of something that originates from outside ourselves, something which becomes our flesh and bones, leaves a residue. It is to this process of unavoidably incomplete assimilation that Pramoedya compares to the fate of Inah.

In the end there is a love story. "Women's arrogance and pride can take flight." It is not at all the calculations of Sobi and Dolly that we see at work here. But the situation is not without reference to them. They count on the foreign. But in the end the foreign is always present through the incorporation of the other. No one, "not one head," ever "feels it has had enough." It is the head that feels this, the place of imagination, and not the stomach or the groin. It is a question of interest: "if s/he is bored, s/he kills her/himself" (the gender is not given in the Indonesian). This interest on which life depends is the willingness to take in the foreign.

It is not question, then, of doing away with the foreign once and for all. The structure of the fetish seems to remain in place by the end of the story. But the role given to it becomes immensely larger. The foreign flows through Pramoedya's story if we think of his language and particularly of the jokes. Dolly knows that dark is white, that names and things are different. She knows this from what happened to her:

Her *tuan* called Rodinah “Dolly.” She was indeed like a Japanese doll. The name “Rodinah” was erased from history. She became “Dolly”—and a real doll through and through.

The Ambonese, being allies of the Dutch, are called white. It is not simply that Rodinah/Dolly knows this; she knows also that they “had to be seen” (*harus dilihat*) as white. She can’t believe her eyes; she has, “as a white skinned maid,” to see as she must see. If they can be seen as white, she also can be seen as white. This new method of perception turns out to be in her interest as she comes to conceive it. The absurdity of language detached from objects generates the humor here. It is a type of joke that occurs first in the opening paragraph, the time of the first slave being “before Coen became the statue the Japanese swept away from the front of the Finance Building.” Jan Pieterszoon Coen was a Gouverneur-Generaal, the founder of Batavia on the site called till then Jayakarta, and is credited with establishing Dutch authority in the Indies. In whose understanding the name “Coen” is a statue and no longer a significant historical figure is at this point unclear. But it is said in the voice of the narrator; without his memory there would be no joke.

Rodinah/Dolly’s strategy follows from the narrator’s joke. Names differ from things; things come to look like their names. Her *tuan* calls her “Dolly” and “she is indeed like a Japanese doll.” But having been named “Dolly,” “[s]he became ‘Dolly’—and a real doll through and through.” She takes on the attributes of her name after, first, the *tuan* had discovered these attributes in her, to her surprise. Dolly is no longer Rodinah, but a doll, as Coen is a statue. “Dolly’s” strategy as well depends on a joke. The pay-off for “Dolly” is the admission of numerous *tuan* that they might have given their names to babies in which she had a fifty percent share. They pay in lieu of having their names properly attached to those who could be their children. Profiting from this illegitimacy, this gap between name not given and a thing, keeps not only Dolly, but Inah and Sobi slaves. It is the invention of the fetish at the same time. “My attraction for them is my looks; and my looks are the result of illegitimate descent.” And initially of sickness, contamination, which left a residue which, changing my appearance, evoked words: “*njai*,” “Dolly.”

“Rodinah” is “erased from history”; there is no lasting memory of anyone of that name, except, of course, in the mind of the narrator. The erasure of “Rodinah” from history suggests something more general about the relations of Indonesians to Dutch. What is at stake is the possibility of genealogy. Through the workings of the fetish, names are not inscribed in history. There is continuous illegitimate descent and obscuration of the bearers of Indonesian names. The narrator undoes this forgetting. His jokes restore origins whose loss is inherent in the working of the fetish.

Pramoedya locates the fetish of appearance within a certain linguistic situation, one where one believes what one hears and not what one sees, as when Rodinah realizes that dark Ambonese must be seen as white. It is not that she, Rodinah, is presented as incapable of seeing the difference. The question is what she does with what she hears. The narrator, once again, establishes all aspects. Ambonese are not white in color. But Ambonese are white in status. That is the joke, and it once again depends on the possibility of seeing both aspects without reduction of one to the other. The result is the freeing of language from its use to produce identity. Identity is, of course, upset when a person has more than one; “Rodinah”/“Dolly” are incompatible.

There is, in any case, another story of hearing contained in the same narrative. It is the story of the person who makes the jokes. The unidentified narrator, who never says "I," nevertheless has to be posited as the origin of sentences such as "Dolly did not know the politics of 'divide et impera'. . . ." Dolly did not know the Latin phrase, but someone else who speaks from within the text, the narrator, does know. This narrator comes most clearly into view when he contrasts what he knows with what his characters know. And this happens most often when jokes are told.

But not exclusively. The word "*dan*," meaning "and," appears fifty-eight times at the head of sentences in a text which has only eleven short pages. What is more, it is often used not to introduce a new subject, but merely to add one more detail, often one which has only a tenuous connection with the subject of the previous sentence:

No one knew what sickness attacked a person as pretty as that. Not even the two radios and the gramophone understood. And one unhappy day people buried her. Just before her moment of death

The first sentence states a fact which already contains an irony. The second sentence is only a statement of irony. As such, they make clear the narrator's stance toward Dolly and her wish for radios and a gramophone. The following sentence, beginning with "and," is again factual. The "and" here separates the two tonalities. The narrator clearly means to be ironic in the first two sentences of the quotation, but it is difficult to identify precisely his tone in the sentence describing the "unhappy day." This is either a sentence that conveys the general sadness of Dolly's death and the narrator's sadness as well, or it merely reports that people were made sad, a report somehow chilled by the narrator's slight irritation with the pretensions or delusions of those who do not comprehend that death also attacks pretty women and that those who want radios and gramophones greatly overestimate these objects. The last sentence comes as an interruption. Without "and," indicating something additional, the interruption would be less noticeable.

Here is another case where tonalities are separated by the initial "and":

This was because he vaguely felt that politics meant all sorts of sins. His tuan often said as much. And everything the tuan said was law [wet]—no different than the law made by the government.

Here "and" introduces a sentence which intensifies and clarifies the sense of the previous sentence. In this case "and" underscores a difference between an editorial commentary in the last sentence and a descriptive statement that could be merely the reporting of what the character feels.

"And" can indicate insistence, especially in the voice of a character:

"I can sing 'yua olwees in mai haat.' And Miss Mari is mad about my voice," said Sobi strongly.

One piece of information is added to another. Without "and," the two bits—that he can sing and that Miss Mari is mad about his voice—would be discrete. With "and," one sees that they stem from a single intention: Sobi cannot stop boasting. But perhaps "and" always indicates an insistence; always, that is, says that something further is to be heard and will be heard.

Even when “and” has the function of dividing one voice from a second, often enough both of them the narrator’s as he speaks in different tonalities, it also indicates a third source, more fundamental than either of the first two, which is distinct from the voice of the narrator. The insistence of “and” in contrast to the irony of the narrator indicates that there is something else to be heard, something more which resides in the very origin of the story. The narrator tells a story; he is interrupted by more things to say, not necessarily ironic things, and this forms the text. The narrator is interrupted by an insistent word, “and”; there is something to hear. One will hear it presently when it can be assimilated to the voice that presumably tells the story.

The story is one of descent. Of genealogy as the erasure of at least some of the persons inscribed in the genealogy. There is the sergeant who is left only with a mark in Latin letters in a big book and without a name. There is Rodinah, a name erased from history. But their story is told nonetheless. Precisely what has been effaced comes back. And it comes back at best only ambiguously in the voice of the narrator. It comes back, rather, as something added, something that cannot be held back, and that upsets voice in so far as voice is thought of as unitary.

The “and” here is not entirely a function of Indonesian, the modernized national language. It resembles the word “*maka*” in traditional Malay texts. There, every sentence often begins with “*maka*.” If it is translated, it is rendered usually as “thus” or “so,” as in “thus the story goes” perhaps as well as “and so this follows.” “*Maka*” indicates that the story is retold and that the events are related within the framework of the prosodic form; their logic is the logic of succession and not of verisimilitude. “*Dan*” (and) is similar but different. It indicates that there is in each instance something more to say. It lacks a tradition of usage which would indicate the antiquity of the story. Instead, this story, the story of an author, may be new; something heard for the first time. And yet it escapes the voice of the narrator to a certain degree by insisting and adding. The initial “and” is neither an idiosyncrasy of the narrator’s style nor the revival of a tradition. It is between these two. It indicates that there is something to hear, something that wants to make itself heard, that cannot be fully attributed to an identifiable voice. The difference between “*maka*” and “*dan*” is that “*dan*,” with its uncertain provenance, remains a foreign element which is also a part of the language. Its status is evident in the title where precisely it does not appear where one might expect it to. Instead of “Djongos dan Babu” (Flunky and Maid) there is “Djongos + Babu” (Flunky + Maid). “+” is a sign that transcends particular languages. It indicates the appearance of something additional without the addition stemming from something within the phrase or from within the specific language. When one puts “+” into a particular language, saying “plus” or “and” or “*dan*,” one betrays its universal, repetitive quality. It exists outside of voice. Within the text, the word “*dan*” itself continues this function. This voiceless presence indicates only appearance on its way, the possibilities that occur from out of language.

The particular languages closest to this mark in this case are the original Malay and the lingua franca from which it was derived, the predecessors of Indonesian. The language in which stories of *njai* were first told returns, a ghost of Indonesian before it became the national language.

Where does such a narrative materialize if not in the jokes it tells? These are jokes of translation. From “Divide et impera” to “divide and surrender,” from Rodinah to

Dolly, even the Dutch name "Coen" for the statue of the person of the same name, all of these work not exactly through translation, but across languages. It is, in fact, the failure of translation that is important. No true equivalents present themselves. Precisely because Indonesian does not absorb the words it takes in, there are jokes. "Dolly" is left with a name foreign to her just as the first "njai" of the line does not know that the word will apply to her. Indeed, one might say that Indonesian itself is a foreign speech if one thinks of the word for slave, "hamba." "Hamba" is the first-person singular of traditional Malay. Here "hamba" takes its value from the foreign other. Likewise, "yua olwees in mai haat," the most potent words available to Sobi, who knows no foreign languages, remain foreign to him.

It is precisely out of this hearing of the foreign, especially if we expand the word to mean "what arrives to me from outside of myself," as in "foreign to me," that, inside the text, one sees the insistence of the text against its characters and, for that matter, its narrator. It is through the jokes of the text, through the acceptance of the non-equivalence of words between languages, that genealogy is restored. We know that Rodinah = Dolly, that "divide et impera" = "divide and surrender," and that these equations never balance. Exactly in this lack of balance, this irreducibility of one side to the other, forgotten genealogy, genealogy in which relationship was never legally and thus "permanently" marked, reappears. With the reappearance of genealogy, the acceptance of the foreign as foreign, the fetish disintegrates. It cannot work except by accepting that "Rodinah" "really is" "Dolly" and that therefore it is possible to become Dutch because one already looks so. The function of proper names to establish identity fails.

When, at the end, Inah "surrenders," she follows the mistranslation from the Latin which describes Dutch colonial policy. And she repeats a universal story, one that insists on being told despite the unawareness of those who enact it. The final paragraph, with its abrupt switch of reference from the fetish to the universal story of love, shows us that Inah never got what she expected. She found herself in another story altogether. It is a question of mistranslation, "surrender" = "impera," from one generation to the next. The same story, the same words, result in different understandings and different consequences.

By the end of the story, words have untied themselves from identities. Signs are no longer bound into an "I" who believes herself to contain them. The property of a universal story, they repeat themselves with various effects. Genealogy returns not as an inheritance one can make use of, but as history which, upsetting the very possibility of recognition and thus of the achievement of social place, opens the future to unforeseen possibilities. Without the fetish, without legal genealogy, revolution. And, and even possibly "or," literature.