
WOMEN AND MODERNITY: READING THE FEMME FATALE IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY INDIES NOVELS

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In colonial Indonesia, literary works written in Malay by Chinese authors were commonly denigrated as pulp fiction, and therefore deemed “un-literary,” due to their affinity with stories of secrecy, scandal, sex, and crime.² The sinister sensibilities of these novels supposedly ran counter to the ideal notion of literature as “beautiful writings,” which the colonial government had attempted to introduce in the Netherlands Indies beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century.³ This article offers a close examination of one such novel, *Si Riboet atawa Boenga Mengandoeng Ratjoen: Soeatoe Tjerita jang Betoel Terdjadi di Soerabaja Koetika di Pertengahan Taon 1916, jaitoe Politie Opziener Coenraad Boenoe Actrice Constantinopel jang Mendjadi Katjinta’annja* (Riboet, or the Venomous Flower: A True Story which Occurred in Soerabaja in Mid-

¹ I thank those who read and commented on this essay at different stages: Tamara Loos, John Wolff, Sylvia Tiwon, Benedict Anderson, and *Indonesia*'s editors and anonymous reviewer. Any remaining errors are, of course, my own.

² Claudine Salmon, *Literature in Malay by the Chinese of Indonesia: A Provisional Annotated Bibliography* (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1981). See also Elizabeth Chandra, “National Fictions: Chinese-Malay Literature and the Politics of Forgetting” (PhD dissertation, University of California–Berkeley, 2006).

³ Balai Pustaka, *Balai Pustaka Sewadjarnja, 1908–1942* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1948); Bureau voor de Volkslectuur, *The Bureau of Popular Literature of Netherlands India: What It is and What It Does* (Batavia: Bureau voor de Volkslectuur, 1930); D. A. Rinkes, “Nota Over de Volkslectuur,” *Commissie voor de Volkslectuur* 155 (1911); K. A. H. Hidding, “The Bureau for Popular Literature,” *Bulletin of the Colonial Institute of Amsterdam* 1,3 (May 1938).

1916, When Police Inspector Coenraad Murdered a Constantinople Actress Who was His Lover),⁴ which, as the title suggests, is a fictionalized account of a high-profile homicide that took place in 1916. The novel, written by Tan Boen Kim, in many ways fits the stereotypes of Chinese-Malay works as stories of sensation and immorality, as well as products of commercialism.

My examination of *Si Riboet* and similar novels, however, reveals that there is more to them than erotic and sensational pulp fiction. I argue that, though condemned as indecent books, to a great extent such writings are the progeny of a late-nineteenth-century school of literature in Europe called "Decadent," which fostered new sensibilities for dark human emotions by taking on subject matters relating to death and sexuality. This article contextualizes Chinese-Malay novels such as *Si Riboet* in two ways: aesthetically, as an overflow of the European Decadent literary movement at the turn of the twentieth century; and, historically, as a reaction to modernization that set off social transformation in the Netherlands Indies. My discussion of *Si Riboet* draws attention to the critical attitude of Indies Chinese authors towards the idea of modernity, which was seen as the progenitor of women's increasing autonomy and young people's diminishing morality in general.

As Chinese-Malay literature was intimately connected with journalism in terms of characters and subject matter, my discussion of *Si Riboet* also takes into account newspaper coverage of the murder on which the novel is based. It was a common practice that Chinese authors also served as reporters or editors at a newspaper or magazine (thus enhancing their public profile); in most cases, writers worked their way to literary prominence by way of a career in journalism. Tan Boen Kim, for instance, was an editor at *Ien Po* and *Kong Po*.⁵ Working as journalists, these writers often took incidents or cases reported in newspapers as the subject matter for their literary compositions. Regarding the case of *Si Riboet*, I will show how literature and the press worked in concert to paint an unorthodox woman as the Decadent femme fatale. That said, my analysis does not attempt to explore the distinctions between the narratives in the novel and in the press.

Indies Decadence

As a sweeping movement in art, the Decadent movement's broadest and most durable influence is found in prose writing.⁶ Its initial articulation in literature is traced to the publication of the journal *Le Décadent* in 1886 France, and in the course of its development has brought shame and fame to authors like Charles Baudelaire, Gustave

⁴ Tan Boen Kim, *Si Riboet atawa Boenga Mengandoeng Ratjoen: Soeatoe Tjerita jang Betoel Terdjadi di Soerabaja Koetika di Pertengahan Taon 1916, jaitoe Politie Opziener Coenraad Boenoe Actrice Constantinopel jang Mendjadi Katjinta'annja* (Batavia: Kho Tjeng Bie & Company, 1917).

⁵ Other cases include Lie Kim Hok, the pioneer of Chinese-Malay literature, who was a contributor to or editor at *Bintang Djohar*, *Pembrita Betawi*, *Perniagaan*, and *Li Po*; Gouw Peng Liang at *Bintang Betawi*, *Sinar Betawi*, and, later, *Perniagaan*; Thio Tjin Boen at *Warna Warta* and *Perniagaan*; Tio le Soei at *Sinar Betawi*, *Perniagaan*, and *Pewarta Soerabaja*; and Kwee Tek Hoay at *Panorama*. This trend was not confined to the Chinese journalistic/literature milieu, but was just as pronounced among Eurasian and Dutch writers, such as F. D. J. Pangemanann, an editor at *Perniagaan*, and, later, *Warna Warta*; G. Francis at *Pantjaran Warta*; and P. A. Daum at *De Locomotief*.

⁶ Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination, 1880–1900* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Flaubert, Émile Zola, and Leo Tolstoy. In general, the designation “Decadent” (or “Decadence”) refers loosely to literary works of late-nineteenth-century Europe that took a particular interest in death, erotica, and the unconscious. It takes for subject matter people of the lower social strata, concentrates on the problem of degeneration, and points to the inescapability of fate, which thus negates moral judgment. Its conviction that the creation of art should be independent of religious, social, or moral concerns made Decadent novels, at the time of their appearance, the target of public outrage and denounced as offensive books. Decadent novels circulated among Europeans in the Indies at the turn of the century, and became a source of aesthetic inspirations for the Chinese writers in the colony. E. M. Beekman, the historian of Dutch colonial literature, called them “French pulp fiction.”⁷

The works of Tan Boen Kim exhibited a wide variety of literary influences, and in particular, traces of Decadent themes. He showed notable interest in the morbid sides of society, as demonstrated by his stories of secrets and transgressions, such as *Tjerita Nona Gan Jan Nio, atawa Pertjinta’an dalem Rasia* (The Story of Miss Gan Jan Nio, or Clandestine Love);⁸ *Pertoenangan dalem Resia, atawa Pertjintaan jang Soetji* (Engagement in Secrecy, or Unsullied Love);⁹ *Rasianja Satoe Gadis* (Secrets of a Girl);¹⁰ and *Resianja Goela-goela* (Secrets of a Mistress).¹¹ He proved to be an inquisitive journalist, too, with his publication of *Tanboenkim’s Pridato* (Tanboenkim’s Speeches),¹² a collection of formal addresses by journalists; and *Tanboenkim’s Pleidooi* (Tanboenkim’s Defenses),¹³ a collection of legal defenses by renowned lawyers. He wrote *Riwajatnja Dr. Sun Yat Sen* (Dr. Sun Yat Sen’s Biography) after Sun passed away,¹⁴ and defended his fellow Indies Chinese who were victimized in the 1918 racial conflict in his book *Peroesoehan di Koedoes* (The Riots in Koedoes).¹⁵ Like his contemporaries, he was especially keen on stories of crime and vice, which usually featured a woman as the central character. *Si Riboet, Nona Fientje de Feniks, atawa Djadi Korban Tjemboeroean* (Miss Fientje de Feniks, or

⁷ E. M. Beekman, *Troubled Pleasures: Dutch Colonial Literature from the East Indies, 1600–1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

⁸ Tan Boen Kim, *Tjerita Nona Gan Jan Nio atawa Pertjinta’an dalem Rasia: Soeatoe Tjerita jang Belon Sabrapa Lama Sasoenggoenja Telah Terjadi dalem Kota Betawi* (Batavia: Drukkerij Tjong Koen Bie & Company, 1914).

⁹ Tan Boen Kim, *Pertoenangan dalem Resia, atawa, Pertjintaan jang Soetji* (Batavia: Tan Thian Soe, n.d.).

¹⁰ Tan Boen Kim, *Rasianja Satoe Gadis: Soeatoe Tjerita jang Belon Sabrapa Lama Telah Terjadi di Betawi* (Batavia: Lie Tiong Goan & Company, n.d.).

¹¹ Tan Boen Kim, *Resianja Goela-goela* (Batavia: Kwee Khe Soei, 1912).

¹² Tan Boen Kim, *Tanboenkim’s Pridato* (Batavia: Soen Boen, 1929).

¹³ Tan Boen Kim, *Tanboenkim’s Pleidooi: Moeat Pleidooinja Journalist-journalist, Advocaat-advocaat en Procureur Ternama, jang Belaken Diri Sendiri atawa Clientnja Lantaran Persdelict, Klachtdelict dan Laen-laen Perkara Delict, Kadjahatan atawa Crimineel, Depan Sidang Pengadilan di Indonesia* (Batavia: Soen Boen, n.d.).

¹⁴ Tan Boen Kim, *Riwajatnja Dr. Sun Yat Sen: President Pertama dari Republik Tiong Hoa Bin Kok* (Batavia: Kwee Khe Soei, 1929).

¹⁵ Tan Boen Kim, *Peroesoehan di Koedoes: Satoe Tjerita jang Betoel telah Terjadi di Djawa Tengah pada Waktu jang Belon Sabrapa Lama* (Batavia: Drukkerij Goan Hong & Company, 1920).

Victim of Jealousy),¹⁶ *Boenga Berdjiwa* (Lady of Pleasure),¹⁷ and *Prampoean jang Kedjam* (Wicked Woman)¹⁸ are Tan's adaptations of the Decadent femme fatale.

The femme fatale is the Decadents' favorite theme.¹⁹ The period's new awareness of the unconscious reinforced scientific and artistic explorations into sexuality and erotic desire. As both creative fields were heavily represented by men, one finds many of these explorations performed on female subjects. Women thus became central in the Decadents' interrogations of natural determinism and unconscious desires. For Baudelaire, for instance, woman is intrinsically "closer to nature than a man is." She is "governed by physical instinct," and as such "reduced to her body."²⁰ Ruled by her "purely sensual and animal aspect," a woman is supposedly more predisposed to the destructive nature of passion. The femme fatale is a woman who runs into tragedy in the pursuit of sensual and material fulfillment. She is also one who ensnares man to serve her purpose and leads him to a self-destructive path. The protagonists in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (1862) and *Nana* (1880), Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877), Louis Couperus's *Eline Vere* (1889), Stephen Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), and Frederick van Eeden's *The Deeps of Deliverance* (1900) are all notable examples of the adulterous, doomed woman. The two Dutch authors, Couperus and Van Eeden, were not as internationally recognized as Flaubert or Tolstoy, but must have been read by the Dutch people in the colony and were likewise accessible to the generally multi-lingual Indies Chinese authors.²¹

Tan's novel *Si Riboet* shares this particular thematic pattern. It features an indigenous opera actress, Riboet, who is slain by her lover, a Dutch police inspector named Sebastiaan Otto Charles Coenraad. The story derives from an actual murder that took place in Soerabaja, East Java, and combines actual events with the author's speculation and imagination. The interracial nature of the relationship, Riboet's appeal as a theater prima donna, and the brutality of the killing made the incident a lasting subject of press coverage and public conversation. Dutch newspapers such as *Soerabajaasch Nieuwsblad*, *Soerabajaasch Handelsblad*, *Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant*, and *Bataviaasch Handelsblad*; indigenous newspapers like *Oetoesan Hindia*; and, to a greater extent, Chinese-subsidized newspapers such as *Pewartas Soerabaia*, *Sin Po*, *Tjahaja Timoer*, and *Perniagaan* followed the case from the morning after it took place, through

¹⁶ Tan Boen Kim, *Nona Fientje de Feniks atawa Djadi Korban Tjemboeroean: Soeatoe Tjerita jang Betoel Soeda Terdjadi di Betawi pada Pertengahan Taon 1912* (Batavia: Drukkerij Tjong Koen Bie & Company, 1915).

¹⁷ Tan Boen Kim, *Boenga Berdjiwa: Soeatoe Tjerita di Soerabaja, Lantaran Kaeilokan Lie Keng Ien Mengorbankan Djiwa; Sengadja Dikarang Boeat Menjega Datengnja Penjeselan* (Batavia: Goan Hong & Company, 1919).

¹⁸ Tan Boen Kim, *Prampoean jang Kedjam! Soeatoe Tjerita jang Belon Sabrapa Lama Terdjadi di Weltevreden* (Batavia: Toko Anggoer Njonja, 1920).

¹⁹ Pierrot, *Decadent Imagination*, pp. 38, 119–43.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²¹ An educated Chinese in Java was likely to have a good command of Malay, Dutch, and Javanese, and possibly Chinese and English as well. If he (or, rarely, she) was a journalist or author, a command of Dutch was imperative, even if self-taught. Beginning in the 1910s, due to the establishment of Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan schools in the previous decade, which promoted English instead of Dutch, a generation of English-oriented Chinese writers emerged, exemplified by Njoo Cheong Seng and Liem Khing Hoo. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* was translated into Malay and circulated in the 1930s by a Chinese publisher in Batavia under the title *Anna Karenine, atawa Hatinja Satoe Prempoean* [Anna Karenine, or the Heart of a Woman] (Batavia: Hoa Siang In Kok, n.d.).

the investigation, to the court hearing and verdict for approximately two months. Tan's fictionalized version of the case was published in the following year. It appears to be an attempt to repeat the success of his previous novel, *Nona Fientje de Feniks*, which is also based on an actual incident—the notorious murder of a Eurasian prostitute by her Dutch lover. Being a journalist and novelist at the same time, Tan had a penchant for sensational stories, which he drew from newspaper reports. Being multilingual, with a good command of Dutch, Malay, and possibly Chinese, Javanese, and English, he could gain access to works of foreign literature at least through Dutch translation. His appetite for stories of crime and erotic passion suggests that he was considerably influenced by Decadent literature.

Thus it is not surprising that Tan's *Si Riboet* may be viewed as a mirror image of a work by the famous French Decadent, Zola. Zola's novel *Nana*, published in 1880, features the debauched life of an opera actress whose self-indulging sexual affairs with men of the Parisian elite cast her as a high-class prostitute. In the Chinese-Malay novel *Rasia Bandoeng, atawa Satoe Pertjintaan jang Melanggar Peradatan Bangsa Tiong Hoa* (Secrets of Bandoeng, or Love which Transgressed Chinese Customs), Zola's *Nana* circulated among Chinese school adolescents.²² Its identical protagonist and theater setting must have appealed to Tan when he decided to write a fictionalized version of Riboet's life and eventual death. Both Riboet and *Nana* are prima donnas who display the qualities of both celebrity and temptress. Riboet's lover/murderer, Coenraad, was almost a living version of the string of lovers whom *Nana* entices to ruin. In *Si Riboet*, the actual murder is described in the last one-third of the novel, while the first two-thirds are Tan's own reconstruction of Riboet's past. In supplying this fictional biography, Tan appears to have turned to *Nana*'s literary structure, as *Si Riboet* is organized in the same way. Both novels open with an opera scene that lays out the glamorous and hedonistic milieu of theater life. In *Nana*, the scene features *Nana*'s inaugural performance as a lead actress; in *Si Riboet*'s opening scene, Riboet is a teenager in the audience, and her first experience of theatre inspires her to desire to become an actress. In *Nana*, *Nana*'s inauguration into Parisian elite society begins with her lead role in "The Blonde Venus"; in *Si Riboet*, the Garden of Venus is a "pleasure house" (*roema plesiran*), where Riboet commences her sexual escapades. After the initial theater scenes, the rest of each novel serves as a catalogue of men with whom the protagonist has liaisons, and the destruction she brings to each one of them.²³

Other than as a source of literary inspiration, however, the European Decadent novels were seen as a potential menace by Indies Chinese authors. In many of their compositions, these novels are depicted as potential sources of corruption for the minds of female readers. In the aforementioned novel *Rasia Bandoeng*, for instance, the female protagonist is said to be susceptible to illicit relations due to the licentious books she reads. Zola's *Nana*, which is featured in *Rasia Bandoeng* as the book the protagonist lends to her lover, is described as "a filthy book [*boekoe tjaboel*], just as filthy as most of the books Émile Zola wrote." In *Kemerdikahan jang Membawa Binasa atawa*

²² Chabanneau, *Rasia Bandoeng, atawa Satoe Pertjintaan jang Melanggar Peradatan Bangsa Tiong Hoa: Satoe Tjerita jang Benar Terjadi di Kota Bandoeng dan Berachir pada Tahun 1917* (Batavia: Kho Tjeng Bie & Company, 1918).

²³ It may be purely coincidental that Tan's title "Venomous Flower" evokes Baudelaire's scandalous collection of poems, *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs du Mal*, 1857), for which the author was prosecuted and the book condemned as "an insult to public decency."

Rasianja Gadis dari Familie Ong (Freedom which Leads to Disaster, or Secrets of the Ongs' Daughter), the protagonist's lover seduces her by evoking the "European stories" they read together in which "love means to sacrifice even the most precious thing in the world."²⁴ These references to Zola's works and other "European stories" suggest at least two things: that European Decadent works were read in the Indies, and that they were considered hazardous readings for women. The author's description of *Nana* as a dirty book inadvertently indicates that he, too, has read it, as well as "most of the books Émile Zola wrote." But the fact that a male author reads them is not an issue, because he is presumably incorruptible. For female readers, however, these books generate undesirable effects. The author, Chabanneau (pseudonym), is by no means alone in this view. Flaubert, too, apparently considered reading novels to be unhealthy for a woman precisely because "books put ideas in [her] head."²⁵ Woman, from the Decadents' viewpoint, is ruled by natural impulses, incapable of sound reasoning, and therefore vulnerable to corruption. Images conjured up by text alone, we are to infer, can cause them harm.

This double standard with regard to Decadent aesthetics—as a source of artistic inspiration as well as moral contagion—forms the thematic pattern of many Chinese-Malay novels. In many works, the acts of receiving Western education and reading Western novels are described as detrimental to the morals of Chinese girls and to Chinese customs in general. In these stories, the two menaces—Western education and fiction—are conflated and given common signifiers, "progress" (*kemadjoean*) and "modernity" (*moderen*). If the European examination of woman's sexuality in literature was attributed to a growing interest in the idea of the unconscious, the Indies Chinese authors' apprehension of sensual women was articulated almost exclusively as a critical reaction to "progress." Jean Pierrot tells us that Decadent literature, as exemplified by Baudelaire, reflects the widespread anti-feminism of the era.²⁶ Its demeaning thematization of woman, the *femme fatale*, represents a challenge to the feminist struggle for legal equality and to the professionalization of women as a consequence of the industrial revolution. In the Indies, resistance to feminism had yet to have an explicitly gendered language, but found signifiers in the generational divide—the young versus the old (*kaeom moeda*, *kaeom toea*), Western versus Eastern cultural orientations (*kebaratan*, *ketimoeran*), and progress versus customs (*kemadjoean*, *peradatan*). These schisms tended to be defined by a conspicuous question of gender in that the authors (almost always male) generally assumed the voice of the cultural patriarch, while their female characters are portrayed as those who are seduced and afterward victimized by progress.

It is this formulation of modernity as the source of tragedy that became a distinct feature of the Chinese-Malay Decadent literature. This body of work differs from European Decadent writings in that change and progress carry an impression of having a Western, therefore foreign, origin. In the Indies, misgivings about modernity originated in a specific moment in history, the turn of the twentieth century, when

²⁴ Quo Vadis?, *Kemerdekaan jang Membawa Binasa atawa Rasianja Gadis dari Familie Ong: Satoe Tjerita Betoel Terdjadi dalem Tahun 1923 di Weltevreden* (Batavia: Kong Hwee Po, 1923).

²⁵ Mary McCarthy, "Foreword," in Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1979), p. xi.

²⁶ Pierrot, *Decadent Imagination*, p. 124.

capitalization and new technologies initiated profound social transformation. The extent of this transformation stipulated that the previous order of things underwent reconfiguration, and among the changes, notably, were matters of customs related to secular education and the professionalization of women. The Chinese-Malay Decadent novels, including Tan's *Si Riboet*, which proliferated between the second and fourth decades of the twentieth century, speak from the position of the threatened patriarchal order as they feature ruinous women against the backdrop of "modernity." At this point, it is instructive to turn the discussion to the historical specificities that brought about social changes in the Indies.

Modernity, *Komedi*, and Autonomy

The turn of the twentieth century has often been characterized as the beginning of modernization in the Netherlands Indies. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 was gradually followed by the arrival in the Indies of private capital, the construction of infrastructure, and, particularly, after 1900, the promulgation of secular education. With regard to governing, the new century was marked by a liberal principle of rule called the Ethical Policy, thanks to C. Th. van Deventer, a former judicial officer who, upon returning to the Netherlands, wrote an article entitled "Een Eereschuld" (A Debt of Honor), underscoring the moral responsibility of the Dutch government to promote welfare in the colony. This ethical approach came to set the trend for subsequent policies in the Indies, with the expansion of Western-style education as its hallmark. The first two decades of the twentieth century thus saw a rapid increase in the number of schools for indigenous people. The "debt of honor" to the colony was presumably to be repaid in the context of the civilizing mission, which subsequently became a rationale for the Dutch presence in the Indies.²⁷

Needless to say, capitalization and the proliferation of school education set off a profound social transformation in the Indies, particularly in terms of relations between generations. It led to the emergence of a new social category called *kaodem moeda* (the young generation). Takashi Shiraishi defines *kaodem moeda* as the generation that was radically different from those preceding it due to its secular (Western-style) education.²⁸ For this educated generation, Western schooling and basic training gave

²⁷ With the Ethical Policy, colonization in the Indies began a transmutation that was simultaneously intended to improve the conditions of the colonized and to ensure the survival of the colonial system. The presence of Europeans in the colonies could now be defended as part of a necessary phase meant to "uplift" the "backward natives." As in other places, colonizing projects in the Indies were discussed and rationalized in terms of liberation; see, for instance, Alice L. Conklin, "Colonialism and Human Rights, a Contradiction in Terms? The Case of France and West Africa, 1895–1914," *American Historical Review* 103,2 (1998): 419–42. Animating such liberal projects was sympathy for the backward and underprivileged colonial subjects that made its way into the political scene by way of legislation; see Jullie Ellison, "A Short History of Liberal Guilt," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1996): 344–71. But as Shelby Steele points out, the problem with liberal guilt projects is that they turn away from the main problem by legislating sympathy; see his article "Affirmative Action Must Go," *The New York Times*, March 1, 1995, p. A19. The Ethical Policy endorsed by the Dutch Liberal Party similarly gave way to legislation for the betterment of colonial subjects, rather than confronting the root of the problem, which was colonization itself. Instead of calling for an end to the Dutch occupation of the Indies, the Ethical Policy actually provided an excuse to sustain the occupation and colonial initiatives.

²⁸ Takashi Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912–1926* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 30.

them access to bureaucratic positions and a wide variety of professions that were not accessible to Indonesians from previous generations. In the twentieth century, the son of a peasant no longer had to become a peasant, but had the option of becoming a clerk, a teacher, a physician, a salesman, an accountant, and so on. "Ordinary people" began to compete for positions that were previously reserved for the sons of Europeans and indigenous aristocrats. This reality gave rise to a new conception of subjectivity, that is, a newly attained consciousness that one could move across class strata in what had been formerly a rigid social hierarchy. In Mas Marco Kartodikromo's 1919 novel *Student Hidjo*, for instance, Hidjo's father is determined to send him to school in Holland to prove that his son, too, "can study like the children of regents and princes." Thus, by way of education and training, the son of an entrepreneur like Hidjo, in some aspects, can become the equal of regents and princes.

Indigenous girls also enjoyed more mobility. On June 17, 1916, *Pewarta Soerabaia* published a brief observation that indigenous girls were entering the workforce as office clerks and saleswomen, easily taking over the two professions that thus far had been reserved for European women, because they "were willing to accept a smaller wage ... In two or three years, when students of Kartini schools graduate, there will be even more indigenous girls working at offices and stores, especially now that Kartini schools have grown like mushrooms in the rainy season."²⁹ This meant, the newspaper reporter speculated, that it would become even more difficult for European women to find jobs.

All these changes, however, were not without obstacles. If education was a ladder that sons could use to climb up the social hierarchy, early on "being educated" was considered a potential hazard for daughters. To begin with, schooling was deemed unnecessary for girls. As Kartini and Dewi Sartika, Indonesia's national heroines for women's emancipation, explained, parents' ultimate goal in raising a daughter was to marry her off, not for her to take up a profession.³⁰ In fact, a daughter's marriage could function as the vehicle for her family's social mobility. Another reason for not sending daughters to school was that schooling was at odds with the customary practice in Java of secluding young women (*pingitan*). As soon as girls reached puberty, they were kept away from public places so as to prevent their interaction with men who were not family members. As a consequence, a girl, if she was lucky enough to get any formal education, was only allowed to attend school up until she reached puberty.

Yet even though their school experience was relatively brief, both Kartini and Dewi Sartika maintained that it fundamentally influenced the way they perceived life. Kartini, to whose memory the abovementioned "Kartini schools" were dedicated, analogized schooling to a bird's wings; it gave her the sense of freedom. The interactions, knowledge, and literacy that her education conferred expanded her view of the world beyond her hometown, Jepara, and beyond Java, and, later on, beyond the walls of her confining quarters. Her subsequent *pingitan*, therefore, became all the

²⁹ "Hindia Nederland," *Pewarta Soerabaia*, June 17, 1916.

³⁰ Kartini, *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1963); and Rochiati Wiriaatmadja, *Dewi Sartika* (Jakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1985).

more constricting, precisely because she had tasted the feeling of “freedom.” In Kartini’s words, she “was taught to fly, only to be afterwards caged.”³¹

The rigor of confinement varied in degree, depending on the woman’s social stratum. David Mandelbaum’s study on societies that practice women’s confinement comparable to *pingitan*, called *purdah* (literally, “curtain”) in his South Asian cases, reveals a shared assumption that women possess disruptive potentials, which supposedly are inherent in their sexuality.³² This notion is curiously parallel with that of European’s nineteenth-century perception of woman, as expounded by the Decadent artists. In *purdah* societies, Mandelbaum suggests, a man’s honor is closely linked to the conduct of his female kin. So adolescent women have to be confined within the female quarter of the house, or, in more cases, wear a veil or a cloak when they venture outside. Additionally, as was the case in Java, strict seclusion becomes a mark of high status. As compared to “ordinary” and “poor” families, wealthier and higher ranking families presumably had more honor at stake, and therefore exercised a stricter seclusion of women.³³

We know from Tan Boen Kim’s novel and other sources that, at the time Riboet, the slain actress, was a young woman, such customary confinement was enforced. An article in *Oetoesan Hindia*, a Soerabaja-based daily catering to indigenous readers, entitled “Perobahan Alam Perampoean” (Changes in Women’s Nature), threw into question those attempts “everywhere” to “press women forward.”³⁴ In newspapers these days, the article continued, one can “always spot all sorts of discussion from both sides—the pros and the cons of this movement.” Opinions from both sides, it argued, are equally justifiable and essentially share a common goal, as they stem from concerns over the morality of women, and because “it is not possible that any parents would wish misfortune for their daughter.” In this article, the issue of seclusion was brought up and presented as a measure taken for the sake of the girls. “The old custom that prohibits daughters to leave their house when they reach maturity” is meant “primarily for their security.” Venturing outside the house, the article reiterated, exposes young women to people with evil intentions. It is advisable, therefore, that this particular custom be maintained, “to keep [daughters] away from the danger they cannot recognize.”

In *Si Riboet*, the young woman protagonist feels restrained by this custom. Early in the novel, Tan relates Riboet’s wish to see a *komedi* show, the traveling popular theater, performing at Glodok Square, not far from her house in Kemajooran. But she cannot go, we are told, “because her parents would absolutely not allow her to go by herself.”³⁵ In Tan’s account, Riboet, like other young Javanese women, cannot venture into public places without the company of an adult relative. Her father is described as

³¹ Kartini, *Habis Gelap*, p. 23.

³² David G. Mandelbaum, *Women’s Seclusion and Men’s Honor* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1988).

³³ Though Mandelbaum bases his theory on *purdah*, a particularly strict type of seclusion practiced among South Asian Muslims and Hindus, his findings extend to Java, where the tradition of confinement was closely intertwined with, if not derived from, those of Hinduism and Islam.

³⁴ “Perobahan Alam Perampoean,” *Oetoesan Hindia*, August 12, 1916.

³⁵ Tan, *Si Riboet*, p. 13.

a pious (*beragama*) Muslim, who would not let her be exposed in public.³⁶ Since he is a foreman (*mandor*) at a European store, his family is not wealthy, “but not that poor either.”³⁷ We do not know for sure if the real Riboet was ever under customary confinement, or if her family was from a high social class, but Tan’s casual descriptions of the restrictions that confine this character in the novel, on more than one occasion, indicate that the experience was normal for Riboet.

Against this cultural background, the pervasive social transformation brought about by capitalization, secular education, and employment emancipation took place in the Indies. Kartini began to question her own anticipated seclusion upon learning that a former schoolmate, a female, was going to Europe to a teacher’s training school.³⁸ School, to Kartini, was an experience that increasingly challenged what she had formerly known as “custom.” It made foreign what was previously familiar. For the protagonist in Tan’s novel, the fictional Riboet, a job with the theater serves as an alternative to customary female roles. The traveling theater troupe is, to her, what school and books were to the aristocratic Kartini. It offers escape in several degrees. The foreign origin of *komedi*, the fictional world it stages every night with Riboet in the lead role, and the endless imaginary sojourns to distant and unfamiliar places, altogether offer an absolute flight from the domestic-oriented life of ordinary women. In reality, for women, the profession “theater actress” did guarantee a good amount of personal autonomy that only came with financial independence. Matthew Cohen’s study on *komedi stamboel* notes that, in its origin, this theater was “often less a mode of artistic expression than an escape from economic and social repression.”³⁹ To understand how theater allowed greater autonomy for women, we need to look first at how capitalism in the Netherlands Indies gave birth to commercial theaters like *komedi*, and how *komedi*, in turn, enticed women away from their customary habitats.

The scholar and former colonial bureaucrat John Furnivall tells us that the combination of colonialism and capitalism led to the formation of plural urban societies. The emergence of a bureaucratic state, plantations, mining and other industries, and the development of facilities and infrastructure to support them, such as schools, transportation, communications, and a police force, among others, not only attracted migrants from a variety of ethnic groups, but created urban populations that were multiethnic in character.⁴⁰ Tan Sooi Beng’s study of the popular theater *komedi bangsawan* reveals that in such a plural society new cultural trends and forms emerged.⁴¹ Among them were new types of entertainment, like the moving picture, gramophone, itinerant music band and foreign theater, and, relevant to our discussion, indigenized versions of popular performing arts, such as *komedi*, which essentially was

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁸ Kartini, *Habis Gelap*, p. 13.

³⁹ Matthew Cohen, *The Komedi Stamboel: Popular Theater in Colonial Indonesia, 1891–1903* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), p. 45.

⁴⁰ John S. Furnivall, *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939).

⁴¹ Tan Sooi Beng, *Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993). The name “bangsawan” might also have derived from Indra Bangsawan, the proprietor of Komedi Indra Bangsawan.

a Malay adaptation of the European musical theater.⁴² To cater to the diverse ethnic backgrounds and tastes of urban populations in the last decade of the nineteenth century, popular theaters began incorporating elements that were not of local origin. *Komedi bangsawan*, for instance, is similar to Riboet's *komedi stamboel*; the principal difference is that *bangsawan* (literally, "aristocrat") specializes in the performance of Malay courtly tales, while *stamboel* (from "Istanbul") is dedicated to the legends of Constantinople. This distinction, however, was not at all rigid; the first *komedi stamboel* from late nineteenth-century Soerabaja performed stories from *Arabian Nights*. In general, *komedi* troupes staged miscellaneous stories from Europe, China, India, the Americas, and the Middle East. The opera in which Riboet last performed on the night of her murder, "Nji Poetri Sepatoe Glas" (Glass-shoe Princess; *Asschepoester* in Dutch), for instance, was an adaptation of Cinderella.

Bred by capitalism, *komedi* was highly commercial in nature. In contrast to traditional theater, which was generally religious in orientation, *komedi* was performed to entertain and primarily to generate profit for the proprietors.⁴³ Widespread advertising for *komedi* shows and the ascendance of its performers to celebrity status were symptoms of *komedi*'s association with commercialism. Print advertisements cultivated the public's desire to partake in the theater experience as spectators, and advertising was also instrumental in promoting theater performers into public figures. Laura Mulvey calls this makeover an overvaluation of an object, referring to, in this case, the transformation of a person into a "star."⁴⁴ In *Si Riboet* (as in Zola's *Nana*), the theater troupes' lead stars, like Riboet, Siti Awah, and Ali Kabir, are constantly surrounded by fans who shower the actors with gifts and cash—"friends abound, doting wealthy men no fewer."⁴⁵ The fans, we learn from various press reports and Tan Boen Kim's description in the novel, generally belonged to the higher social strata, as they were the ones with the capacity to spend lavishly. The public's desire to attend *komedi* shows (created and reinforced by advertising) ensured profit for the troupes, and the fans' desire for identification with the most popular theater performers engendered star status and monetary gains for the actors.

For women in particular, *komedi* was socially liberating in several ways. Tan Sooi Beng's research on *komedi bangsawan* reveals that commercial theaters, at a time when women did not venture out in public, provided a social space where women, whether married or single, could be present without being perceived as transgressive.⁴⁶ The commercial nature of *komedi* may have made it indifferent to gender restrictions—the more spectators, the better. At the same time, the presence of female performers on stage may also have made women spectators tolerable in the eyes of theatre goers and others. Previously, female performers had been taboo in traditional popular theaters,

⁴² According to Cohen, *komedie* (or *komedi*) drew directly on the conventions of European opera in terms of technology and dramaturgy, including, in particular, the stage setting, character-based acting with makeup and costumes, musical orchestra accompaniment, and division of plays into scenes and acts; see his *Komedie Stamboel*, pp. 40–41.

⁴³ James Brandon, *Theatre in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

⁴⁴ Laura Mulvey sees the cultish adoration of movie stars as a disavowal of castration, a substitution, and an overvaluation—therefore, a "fetish." See Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 21.

⁴⁵ Tan, *Si Riboet*, p. 23.

⁴⁶ Tan, *Bangsawan*, p. 31.

and so female roles generally had been assumed by male performers.⁴⁷ In British Malaya, Tan points out, female performers joined theater troupes only in the late nineteenth century. In the Indies, impoverished Eurasian women were among the first generation of *komedie stamboel* performers in the 1890s.

Another liberating aspect of *komedie* was the opportunity it gave to many women to become professional actresses. For the destitute Eurasian actresses of early *komedie stamboel*, theater offered “a way to work for a living, which is preferable to those [...] who live as prostitutes.”⁴⁸ Being a member of a theater troupe in those days signaled a substantial shift in a woman’s private and public roles. By joining theater, a woman became financially independent, as performers received either a salary or a share of the profits. Remunerated labor, as Virginia Woolf reminds us, was the first step toward women’s emancipation.⁴⁹ Only by being financially independent can a woman begin to step outside her father’s authority (or her husband’s, if she is married) in order to assert her own will. In *Si Riboet*, financial independence brings about additional advantages for a woman, such as greater autonomy in choosing a marriage partner or electing to remain unattached. Members of *komedie* troupes, generally, experienced frequent travel, intense interactions, and shifts in personnel, conditions that led many members to live together as romantic partners or in common-law marriages rather than wed. In the novel, *Si Riboet*, and in contemporary press reports of Riboet’s murder, Samad is referred to as Riboet’s husband (*laki*). In fact, Samad appears to have been her unmarried partner, and as such he did not have a husband’s customary authority over Riboet. Additionally, a stage prima donna like Riboet earned more than her husband/partner, which explains Samad’s assertion in press reports after her murder that she was the dominant one in their relationship. Being autonomous, a woman like Riboet could also initiate divorce.

It was thus not surprising that a woman’s entry into a profession in those days could cause a stir. In the same year Riboet was murdered, the daily *Pewarta Soerabaia* broke the following news:

It is reported that the local post office has employed a Chinese girl as clerk, with a salary of f150 a month. The young woman is the first Chinese girl to assume a governmental job, and is given a salary of f150 because she has passed the HBS [Hoogere Burger School] graduation exam.⁵⁰

Many Chinese readers and journalists reacted to this news, including with two articles, in particular, that shared a similar headline, “Chinese Girls’ Progress.”⁵¹ The *Perniagaan*’s version included a question mark at the end, which announced the writer’s misgiving with regard to the idea of women and change. From an article in *Tjahaja Timoer*, we know that most Chinese journalists were contemptuous of the girl’s

⁴⁷ Cohen noted, however, that in nineteenth-century Java, the majority of Chinese opera troupes were all-female. In any case, separation by gender appears to have been the rule. See Cohen, *Komedie Stamboel*, p. 8.

⁴⁸ Cohen quotes this passage from the newspaper *Bintang Barat*; see *Komedie Stamboel*, p. 126.

⁴⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York, NY: Harcourt Inc., 1938).

⁵⁰ “Hindia Nederland,” *Pewarta Soerabaia*, June 16, 1916.

⁵¹ Thiekhan, “Kemadjoeanja Gadis Tionghoa,” *Pewarta Soerabaia*, June 17, 1916; and Psyche, “Kemadjoeanja Nona Tionghoa?” *Perniagaan*, June 28, 1916.

decision to work at the post office.⁵² Tio Hiang Nio, the girl, was only the second Chinese woman to graduate from the Dutch high school, Hoogere Burger School. A year after graduation, we are told, she took up a position at the Soerabaja post office, despite her parents' objection. An article in *Pewarta Soerabaia* includes a long letter from a reader who professes "a state of shock [...] as though hearing thunder on a sunny day," upon reading about Tio's employment.⁵³ The letter alleges that Tio's decision to go to work, despite her "fancy" salary, has brought public shame on her parents, a wealthy family in Soerabaja. The letter writer alleges that people, including an unnamed relative of Tio's, disdainfully "whispered" to let the girl have her way and thus to taste the bitter pill of working among the "civilized" Westerners. Being a woman with paid employment, the letter laments, Tio "no longer relies on her parents for subsistence." She is capable of "going to a European [jewelry] store like Maurice Wolf and others to buy anything she desires." She no longer needs to abide by her parents' rules, now that she is financially independent. Being so highly educated, and now (worse!) salaried, "her family can no longer restrain her freedom." It is thus the writer's conviction that "education for women has to have a limit." The letter continues:

[W]oman in our culture has always relied on her parents, and when she is married, on her husband. But at this time of what they call the age of progress [*zaman kemadjoean*], they no longer care for what is considered good manners, but adopt whatever Westerners do [...] They don't care how many Chinese girls have lost their honor before they are married, because of too much Western education.⁵⁴

Readers of *Pewarta Soerabaia* are also told that a report in the magazine *Tjhoen Tjhioe*, entitled "Moesinnja Prampoean Gadis TH Minggat" (The Season of Chinese Girls Eloping), has caused the letter writer agony. The letter concludes with an appeal to "Mr. Readers" (*toean-toean pembatja*)—that is, to fathers—not to be tempted by the Western way of life, because it will damage their daughters. After all, as the article in *Perniagaan* points out, *madjoe* (being progressive) also means *madjoe* (to step forward), which suggests that a progressive girl would be inclined to expose herself to (male) solicitations.

In the case of Riboet, self-exposure was not just a consequence of acquiring a profession; her exposure, on stage, constituted her livelihood. In addition to gaining autonomy, a successful career in theater also procured her fame. Riboet, more than Tio, not only had a career, but also enjoyed celebrity status. The popularity of theater actresses was, at one point, characterized as some kind of "madness" in *Sin Po*. An article in this Chinese-Malay daily, "Gila Anak Komedi" (Crazy About Theatre Performers), reprimanded Chinese adolescents who were enthralled with *komedi* actresses.⁵⁵ It went so far as to admonish certain "old" (presumably married) men who

⁵² Ong Jr., "Gerakan dan Haloeannja Pengarang-pengarang Melajoe di Hindia Olanda," *Tjahaja Timoer*, August 9, 1916.

⁵³ Thiekhan, "Kemadjoeanja Gadis Tionghoa," *Pewarta Soerabaia*, June 17, 1916. This letter responded to the news published only the night before, so it is very likely that the writer had close affiliation with the newspaper.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ "Gila Anak Komedi," *Sin Po*, August 16, 1916.

had joined in the folly to restrain themselves, and to warn that, for now, “[the newspaper] feels it is unnecessary to name names,” a temporary act of discretion that implied the possibility of future public exposure. In its article “Simpanlah Oeangnja” (Save the Money), *Tjahaja Timoer* editors expressed similar concerns over Chinese fans who spent lavishly on theater stars.⁵⁶ In Zola’s *Nana*, married men’s public appearances with actresses are likewise a subject of newspaper gossip. But the practice begets pride on top of shame, because “such appearances will be saucily reported in the gossip-columns of newspapers read by envious friends and competitors, all the smart people, *le Tout Paris, les clubmen*.”⁵⁷ Female fans “are enticed into copying” theater actresses. It was because of such unbridled admiration for theater stars that the press exhibited cynicism regarding Riboet’s death. Like all celebrities, she was perceived as, to borrow Mulvey’s term, an overvalued object.⁵⁸ Young men, *Pewarta Soerabaia* snickered, saw her as a “theatre goddess” (*bidadari stamboel*), but in reality she was only a “leftover” (*restantjes*).⁵⁹ In other words, the fans had misperceived her value and treated her as being more important than what she deserved as a devalued (castoff) object. Journalists thus took it as their task to caution bewitched fans and to expose the actual value of theater performers.

All of the above—financial independence, fame, sexual liberation, and the other trimmings that commercial theater had to offer—proffered extraordinary alternatives for early twentieth-century women in the Indies. Theater life was a significant flight from women’s customary confinement and matrimonial domesticity. In Tan’s novel, joining a *komedi* troupe allows Riboet to step outside of parental control, which subsequently enables her to refuse the customary arranged marriage. The fictional Riboet finds instead a “husband” of her own choosing. In place of an arranged union based on parental calculation, she chooses matrimony based on love, which, as James Siegel points out, is a modern notion. In his reading of the novel *Djeumpa Atjeh* (1928), Siegel maintains that the protagonist, an educated young woman who dies of grief in anticipation of her arranged marriage, belongs to a “modern” generation. Sitti Saniah, the woman, in accordance with Acehnese custom, is expected to marry a man of her parents’ choice, despite her relationship with Nja’ Amat. Siegel argues that by setting her up with a man of their preference, the parents do not recognize Sitti Saniah’s love for Nja’ Amat. They live by “traditional” codes, which are often in conflict with the “modern” preferences of love-stricken youth. In Siegel’s words, “‘Modernity’ here enters in the form of sentiment, which suggests that love is the basis for modern marriages.”⁶⁰ In Riboet’s case, her profession as theater actress—and the personal autonomy it granted—set her apart from women of tradition. As we know from press reports, she not only chose to stay in a common-law marriage with a fellow trouper, Samad, she also refused to commit herself to Coenraad, her Dutch lover.

This kind of personal freedom was precisely the problem, according to traditionalists. Tan Boen Kim and other journalists reporting on Riboet’s murder made it clear that such an arrangement was not to be tolerated. Her profession as a theater

⁵⁶ “Simpanlah Oeangnja,” *Tjahaja Timoer*, June 26, 1916.

⁵⁷ Douglass Parmée, “Introduction” to Émile Zola’s *Nana* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. x–xi.

⁵⁸ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*.

⁵⁹ “Hindia Nederland,” *Pewarta Soerabaia*, June 22, 1916.

⁶⁰ James Siegel, *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 135.

actress and her casual sexual relations with Coenraad (which her partner, Samad, knew about and even admitted having profited from), in the eyes of the press, were assaults on the societal norm that constitutes a “proper” woman.

Femme Fatale as Male Retribution

The emergence of “modern” women was a cause for concern in the early twentieth-century Indies. Progressive, or “improper” from the conventional viewpoint, women made people of older generations and men, in general, uneasy. The longstanding patriarchal order was challenged when women adapted to change. In the decades following “modernization,” as an editorial in *Oetoesan Hindia* tells us, “women and progress” became a frequent subject of the press.⁶¹ Articles gravitated around such issues as women going to school, women taking up a profession and adopting a European lifestyle, interracial unions, and women’s resistance to arranged marriages. Other than newspapers, literary works also reflect the social and gendered tensions of the period. From the catalogue of Chinese-Malay literature alone, one finds a long list of novels expressing concerns over women embracing “modern” values and practices.⁶² “Modern” here generally signifies “new” or “Western.” Such tensions are strongly echoed in the aforementioned novel *Kemerdikahan jang Membawa Binasa*, which features a girl disowned by her father after she eloped with her lover. In this work,

⁶¹ “Perobahan Alam Perampoean,” *Oetoesan Hindia*, published on August 12 and 14, 1916. See also a polemic in the weekly *Bok Tok*, which was triggered by a letter from “Caroline Tan” advocating equal rights (*hak sama rata*). We know from an open letter by a *Bok Tok* writer, Tan Siok Tjwan, “Open Brief (Soerat Terboeka pada Siansing Tjioe Tik Lien),” *Bok Tok* I,15 (1914), pp. 6–7, that Ms. Tan’s letter provoked many responses, such as “Educatie Prampoean Tionghoa,” in *Bok Tok* I,10; “Leve de Emancipatie,” in *Bok Tok* I,12; and “Lagi Sekali Kemerdika’an Bangsa Tjina,” in *Bok Tok* I,13. Two journalists were especially critical of Ms. Tan; see Tjioe Tik Lien, “Anti-hak Sama Rata,” in *Bok Tok* I,14, pp. 11–13, and “Tjegahlah Perboewatan jang Sala,” in *Bok Tok* I,15 (1914), pp. 16–18; and Lie Biau Kie, “Caroline van Tan?” in *Bok Tok* I,15 (1914), p. 16, deriding Tan’s Western first name as a sign of “European-craze that goes too far” (*gila sama ka Europa’an sampe kliwat dari moesti*).

⁶² Other than those mentioned so far, there are also Probitas (a.k.a. Tan Kim Sen), *Toedjoebelas Tahun dalem Rasia: Satoe Tjerita Bagoes Aken Djadi Satoe Katja bagi Gadis-gadis Tionghoa jang Dapet Pladjaran Europa* (Batavia: Han Po, 1916); Chun Foo Chun and Lim Bok Sioe, *Segala Apa njang Orang Prampoean Haroes Ingat* (Wetvereden: Favoriet, 1917); Tjermin, *Rasianja Satoe Gadis Hartawan atawa Perdjalanan Nona Tan: Satoe Gadis Tionghoa di Welteoreden jang Terpeladjar Tinggi, Achirnja Mengandoeng Baji Rasia Lantaran Kamerdika’annja dan Banjak Dibitjarakan dalam Taon 1917* (Buitenzorg: The Teng Hoeij, 1918); Tan Boen Kim, *Nona Lan Im: Soeatoe Tjerita jang Terdjadi di Betawi pada Waktoe Belon Sebrapa Lama* (Batavia: Goan Hong & Company, 1919); H. Brightson (a.k.a. Han Bing Hwie), *Sair Nasehat Boeat Prampoean Tiong Hoa die Abad ka XX* (Batavia: Kho Tjeng Bie & Company, 1921); Tio Ie Soei, *Nona Tjoe Joe, Pertjinta’an jang Membawa Tjilaka: Ditoelis Menoeroet Tjeritanja Nona Tjoe Joe Sendiri* (Soerabaja: Ang Sioe Tjing, 1922); Njoo Cheong Seng, *Harganja Kasopanan Tionghoa* (Tegal: C. P. Ling, 1923); Njoo Cheong Seng, *Toedjoe Kali Bertjeree*, in *Penghidoeapan* I/2 (February 1925); Njoo Cheong Seng, *Gwi Hian Nio alias Helena: Gadis Tionghoa di Soerabaja jang Beroleh Pladjaran, Pendidikan dan Klakoean Bangsa Barat, Satoe Katja atawa Toeladan bagi Iboe-bapa jang Mempoenjai Anak Prampoean* (Batavia: Lie Tek Long, 1925); Njoo Cheong Seng, *Boeat Apa Ada Doenia*, in *Tjerita Roman* I/8 (August 1929), which is similar in plot with two other novels by Njoo, *Raden Adjeng Moerhia: Peringatan Medan 1929–1933*, published as *Tjerita Roman* VI/65 (June 1934), and *Kris Mataram* (Djokjakarta: Kabe, 1940); Kho Tjoen Thian, *Sepasang Roos dari Pekalongan atawa Boahnja Pendidikan: Soeatoe Tjerita Rahasia Kota Pekalongan, jang Soenggoe-soenggoe Menarik Hati, dan Satoe Pitoetoer Nasehat jang Soeda Banjak Boektinja Orang Allamken, Bagimana Orang-orang Toea Haroes Didik Anak-anaknja, Perloe Sekali Boeat Dibatja, Sebagai Peringatan Bagi Orang jang Mabok Kemadjoean Melangkah Bates* (Pekalongan: Kho Tjoen Thian, 1929); Tan Boen Soan, *Bergerak?* (Soerabaja: Tan’s Drukkerij, 1935); Anak Ponorogo, *Gila Mentega*, in *Tjerita Roman* X/110 (February 1938); Chang Mung Tze, *Nona Modern?*, in *Tjerita Roman* XI/131 (November 1939); and Kho An Kim, *Tjinta Merdeka: Soeatoe Tjerita jang Kedjadian di Kota Medan* (Medan: Indische Drukkerij, 1947), which was originally published in *Pelita Andalas* in 1933.

Western education is blamed as the impetus for her conduct. The author's pseudonym, *Quo Vadis?* (Where are you going?), is itself suggestive of the message, as it derives from the title of a historical novel, in which the male protagonist abandons his roots and converts to Christianity for the sake of his lover. "*Quo Vadis?*" seems to ask the fundamental question that the author is proposing to women who forfeit their family and customs in the pursuit of love.

In novels of this genre, the combination of women, modern education, and personal autonomy usually leads to tragedy.⁶³ A common feature in these stories is a clash of gender—vertically, between fathers and daughters, or horizontally, between men and women—that often involves death. In these novels, the female protagonist generally ends up dead or dying of grief due to unfulfilled love, a forced marriage, being abandoned by her lover, or due to her own "reckless" conduct. One can read this standard plot in two different, and not necessarily contradictory, manners. First, that it was intended to reproach parents who force their daughters to marry against their wishes. Second, which I argue is more likely due to the inevitable death of the female character, it served to condemn those women who discard or ignore traditional female virtues. Such women include those who follow their passion to the extent of eloping with their lover, or consummate a premarital sexual union. One can perhaps see the ghost of Baudelaire looming between the lines here. For Chinese authors more specifically, passion is a threat to a woman's chastity, and premarital chastity is the fundamental condition for a proper woman. The loss of innocence, in many of these stories, leads unchaste women to their deaths. In the seven-page preface to *Kemerdekaan jang Membawa Binasa*, *Quo Vadis?* writes, "Innocence can only be maintained with proper behavior! The loss of proper behavior cannot be paid with anything but ... death!"⁶⁴ In other words, when a woman loses her innocence, she is no longer worthy of living. The writer's notion of innocence (*kesoetjian*) here is not restricted to sexual virtuousness, but includes purity of the heart and mind, which is supposedly well-guarded so long as a woman remains under her parent's supervision. Parents' influence, we are to infer, is the complementary force needed to tame a woman's natural weakness for passion.⁶⁵ Reading *Quo Vadis?*, one comes away with the impression that the author is justifying the (unnatural) death of "improper" women.

⁶³ From the abovementioned discussion in *Oetoesan Hindia* (see footnote 34), we know that sentiments against modernity (for women) were prevalent. Though the works cited in footnote 62 were written by Chinese authors and largely concerned Chinese communities of the Indies, it does not mean that the sentiments were limited to the Chinese population. The cover page of Kho's *Tjinta Merdeka*, for instance, reads, "Even though this story is about the Chinese, it does not only concern [Chinese] customs, because it is composed in accordance with the flow of the era. To be of use by all people, whose girls have been liberated." Kho's message is clear: that the problems of women and liberation were not reserved to one particular ethnic group, but were a product of the era and a challenge to all people.

⁶⁴ *Quo Vadis?*, *Kemerdekaan jang Membawa Binasa*, p. 7.

⁶⁵ What is referred to as "parents" in these novels needs unpacking. As the troubled letter to *Pewarta Soerabaia*, the one responding to Tio Hiang Nio's taking up employment at the post office, reveals, typically it was the father who dreaded and warned against the threat(s) to order posed by disobedient young women. The articles expressing parental concern over daughters' expanding autonomy were essentially made up of uneasy discussions among fathers ("Mr. readers"). In this discourse, the family's objection is voiced by the father, but that does not mean that the father figure is the only spokesperson for the paternal order. Rather, in many instances, the patriarchal order takes on "parents" and "family" for its signifiers. Though masculine, its agents are not limited to men; the patriarchy also employs "customs" and "the family" to perpetuate its cultural primacy.

Newspaper editors' cynical reaction to Riboet's death castigated her for her "transgressions." For a start, most journalists found her profession as a theater actress detestable. As discussed above, a career woman was a new phenomenon in the early twentieth-century Indies, when the concept of salaried jobs was just beginning to include women's labor. Theaters, too, were previously a strictly male world. The earliest female performers were seen as invading a male domain. Such women generally came from impoverished Eurasian backgrounds, women who might otherwise have worked as prostitutes in cities like Batavia and Soerabaja. So there was a curious love-hate attitude toward actresses, even in Riboet's time. Newspaper articles portrayed them as stars, as is evident in the designation that the papers *Tjahaja Timoer* and *Pewarta Soerabaia* used for Riboet: "theatre goddess." Yet, there was a conspicuously condescending attitude toward women of this profession, because being an actress meant to place oneself in the public's gaze. In the novel, Tan Boen Kim tells us that Riboet's father disapproves of her becoming an actress because he cannot bear the thought of his daughter being "gazed at by all sorts of people."⁶⁶ The general assumption that female performers are "easy women" is manifested in the way Tan sexualizes and degrades Riboet's character. Like the journalists, he describes his fictional Riboet as a "whore" (*prampoean latjoer*) and constructs for her the image of a prostitute by highlighting the cash and gifts that she received from her lovers.⁶⁷

The gifts, we are to infer, are what made Riboet a prostitute. In Tan's rendering, the many gifts she receives from a string of lovers are not simply gifts; they are payments given in exchange for sex. In a nonmatrimonial relationship, such exchanges are taken to be indicators of prostitution—the gifts are compensation for sexual favors. Though Coenraad, the lover-turned-murderer, may not have considered Riboet a prostitute, he attempted to construct a relationship with her that was built around his gifts, monetary or otherwise. The relationship's continuation thereafter relied primarily on his ability to keep on giving gifts, to the point where he was troubled by debt. During the police interrogation and court hearings, the actual Coenraad persistently brought up the gifts he had given Riboet. In one newspaper account, he is reported to have reasoned that "when all persuasions [to have Riboet come with him] with sweet words failed, he came to feel sorry [for himself] for being treated like that after wasting so much money on Riboet. To get what he wanted, he then threatened her with a revolver."⁶⁸ In Coenraad's judgment, his monetary offerings should have earned him an "appropriate" return, that is, Riboet's submission to his will. When his gifts were not reciprocated, he considered it justifiable to collect by force, to the extent of taking her life.

There is something about gifts that generates violence. A gift, Jean Baudrillard says, is simultaneously a mark of love and aggression.⁶⁹ Marcel Mauss's research on the system of exchange in archaic societies led him to conclude that a general rule applies

⁶⁶ Tan, *Si Riboet*, p. 70.

⁶⁷ See primarily these *Sin Po* articles: "Kawat Hindia," June 17, 1916; "Soerabaja," June 19, 1916; and "Perkara Boenoe di Soerabaja," August 7, 1916. *Sin Po*'s reports are generally copied from the Dutch newspaper *Soerabajaasch Handelsblad*, but the designation "*prampoean latjoer*" does not seem to be a translation. *Bataviaasch Handelsblad*, which also cited *Soerabajaasch Handelsblad* and *Soerabajaasch Nieuwsblad* as sources, refers to Riboet plainly by name, or refers to her as "*zij*," "*haar*," or "*stamboel-actrice*."

⁶⁸ "Perkara Boenoe di Soerabaja," *Sin Po*, August 7, 1916.

⁶⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981).

to gift-giving: a gift demands restitution, it works like a contract.⁷⁰ In most cultures, a gift has at its core a power that binds the recipient to the donor. The moment one accepts a gift, the gift turns into a debt demanding compensation that ranges from an expression of gratitude to a reciprocation in the form or with a value expected by the donor. Thus, in accepting a gift, one is actually contracting oneself to an obligation. Due to this tacit rule of reciprocity, a gift is capable of generating violence. Mauss's findings, though deriving from what he calls "archaic societies," are by no means obsolete; similar systems, he acknowledges, may also be working in modern societies under different guises.

In *Si Riboet* and press reports, Coenraad gave his gifts with just such an understanding of their contractual power. He desired, and subsequently demanded from Riboet, "appropriate" returns for his gifts. Riboet's acceptance of his gifts, to him, was an acknowledgement of their relationship,⁷¹ which intensified from their being acquaintances to having sexual relations to his desiring her fidelity. We are told that Coenraad wanted to make Riboet his *njai*, an extra-legal, marriage-like domestic arrangement. Unmarried European and Chinese men who came to the Indies commonly adopted indigenous women to be their "housekeepers," who performed the tasks of a household servant as well as those of a bed partner for their masters.⁷² *Pewarta Soerabaia* reported that when asked by the prosecutor if he had intended to marry Riboet, Coenraad denied it, saying "I had only wanted to keep [*piara*] her."⁷³ Riboet's being his "kept woman" would have guaranteed Coenraad exclusive and more permanent access to and rights over her.⁷⁴ But she did not accept his proposal, *Sin Po* reported, "because she did not wish to quit *komedi*."⁷⁵ To her, being his *njai* would mean giving up theater and staying put in Soerabaja. His proposal thus entailed restrictions on her personal and financial autonomy—the rare privileges she enjoyed as an actress.

It was because she exercised her will that Riboet was slain. On the night of her murder, she was reported to have refused to go out with Coenraad, telling him that she was tired. This rejection was the immediate cause of her murder. Coenraad, as he admitted at the trial, did not appreciate being rebuffed, especially not after having

⁷⁰ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990).

⁷¹ Mauss finds that recognition is also won through the act of gift-giving. In ceremonies practiced by the Thimshians, tribesmen bring gifts to their chief as tokens of recognition. The chief, in return, acknowledges his tribesmen by accepting their gifts. See Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 40.

⁷² Although *njai* was not a legal status, many *njai* actually performed the social functions of the master's wife and mother of his children from such a union. They also enjoyed some degree of authority in the domestic sphere, so much so that tales of shrewd and manipulative *njai* abounded during the colonial period. According to Ann Stoler, this type of domestic arrangement was initially promoted by the colonial state with the rationale that a *njai* was a good intermediary to local culture and language for newly arrived European employees. But the practice was later condemned as an affront to the European sense of respectability. See Ann Stoler, "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power," in *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge*, ed. Micaela di Leonardo (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 55–101.

⁷³ "Pepreksaan Perkara Pesakitan Coenraad," *Pewarta Soerabaia*, August 5, 1916.

⁷⁴ The article "Perkara Boenoe di Soerabaja," *Sin Po*, August 7, 1916, uses the word "marriage," but Coenraad then was still married to a European woman who also resided in the Indies, and there was no mention of his intention to divorce. In the novel, Tan Boen Kim uses both "*dipiara*" and "*njai*" (literally, "to be kept," as in "kept woman"). See *Si Riboet*, pp. 93–94.

⁷⁵ "Perkara Boenoe di Soerabaja," *Sin Po*, August 7, 1916.

given her twenty guilders and a gold watch that day.⁷⁶ He testified to having been repulsed by Riboet four or five times before. When asked by the prosecutor why he had killed her the last time, Coenraad answered, "Because Riboet had never been so resistant to coming [with him]."⁷⁷ So, "when all persuasions with sweet words failed," he took out his Beaumont revolver and shot her four times. Then, using a pocketknife, he stabbed her repeatedly.⁷⁸

Tan's novel expresses solidarity with Coenraad's "misfortune," and his fictionalized account seems to blame the victim. The ungrateful "kept-woman" (*goela-goela*), the narrator in *Si Riboet* complains, has turned him down "with a stiff tone that irritates [one's] feeling."⁷⁹ She has offended Coenraad by calling him "a shameless Dutch man, who keeps stalking even after being turned down." Such harsh words, the narrator concurs, "are not pleasant to the ear of the good police officer."⁸⁰ In the novel, the killing is portrayed as an unfortunate but understandable act on Coenraad's part. In fact, Tan's portrayal of Riboet as a materialistic and heartless woman provides an excuse for her lover's crime.

Coenraad, in Tan's account, is deeply in debt because he gives to Riboet beyond what he can afford to give. His salary is only f185 a month, but he has given Riboet gifts and cash worth close to f1,000 (or almost half a year's pay) in over a month.⁸¹ His affection for her is so intense, we are told, that he is indebted to other people for the gifts he has given her. This enormous monetary sacrifice, in Tan's view, is precisely what makes Riboet's dismissal of Coenraad all the more spiteful. As he confessed in the courtroom, Coenraad was deeply in debt because he "could not restrain himself from giving [Riboet] money."⁸² His gifts, therefore, were made possible by borrowing money from others. So what he extended to Riboet were not gifts, but his own debts. What Riboet inadvertently accepted, in turn, were Coenraad's financial obligations.⁸³ The multiplicity of resignifications—from a debt that requires repayment, to a gift that subsequently demands restitution—not only diminished the symbolic value of Coenraad's gifts as "gifts," but intensified the necessity and the urgency of their being compensated or repaid. It was this pressing need for compensation that made Riboet's rejection, on the night of the murder, especially intolerable to Coenraad. The multiple debts, one might say, had subsequently generated multiple shootings and stabbings.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ "Pepreksaan Perkara Pesakitan Coenraad," *Pewarta Soerabaia*, August 5, 1916.

⁷⁸ In newspaper reports, the number of times Riboet was shot varies between three and four, and the number of times he stabbed her ranges between six and eight.

⁷⁹ Tan, *Si Riboet*, pp. 106–7.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 105.

⁸¹ *Pewarta Soerabaia* gave the same figure for Coenraad's salary, but noted that he had spent f1,060 over thirty-four days for Riboet. See "Pepreksaan Perkara Pesakitan Coenraad," *Pewarta Soerabaia*, August 5, 1916.

⁸² "Soerabaja," *Sin Po*, June 19, 1916.

⁸³ Concerning this paradoxical interplay between gift and debt, Jacques Derrida maintains that there is no such thing as a pure gift. Since a gift transforms into a debt upon recognition as a "gift," the gift is thereby annulled; it ceases being a "gift." The impossibility of a pure gift is exemplified by Coenraad's offerings. They not only generated debts, they themselves were debts. See Derrida, *Given Time: I, Counterfeit Money* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

That said, there is a problem with Tan's fictionalized defense of Coenraad. In casting Riboet as a femme fatale, Tan goes so far as to invent her past to create a pattern of debauched and materialistic behavior. Unlike the press coverage that only goes back as far as Riboet's initial encounter with Coenraad, Tan's novel goes further back to her adolescent years. In the novel, Tan's description of the murder and the trial follows faithfully what was reported in the press. But this section only occupies approximately one-third of the entire novel. The first two-thirds are Tan's own (re)construction of Riboet's past. The novel, however, is presented in the manner of an "actually occurred" story, a type of literary work that flourished in the Indies in the first two decades of the twentieth century. This type of literature dealt with events said to "have actually occurred" (*benar-benar terdjadi*) at a certain place and time. The genre's origin can be traced to the 1896 publication of G. Francis's *Tjerita Njai Dasima: Soewatoe Korban dari pada Pemboedjoek* (The Story of Njai Dasima: A Victim of Temptation),⁸⁴ the subtitle of which is "an excellent story that occurred not so long ago in Batavia." This mode of telling stories was later adopted by Indies Chinese authors and became a characteristic of early Chinese-Malay novels. Such novels habitually took for subject matter those events or scandals that the public found sensational at the moment. To understand how facts and fiction mesh in such novels, it is necessary to see how Tan structured factual details, or alleged facts, into his story.

That an extraordinary news event should generate a literary composition was in those days commonplace. In its first lengthy report on the murder of Riboet, *Pewarta Soerabaia* gave an overview of her relationship with Coenraad: their initial attraction to each other, the sacrifices he made to please her with gifts, the warnings from friends about his imprudence, her eventual rejection of him, her murder, and his detention. At the article's end, the reporter exclaimed that the tragedy was a "drama case" (*perkara drama*).⁸⁵ This assertion at first appears to refer only to the dramatic quality of the Riboet-Coenraad relationship, but in an update on the case several days later, a reporter surmised that the whole affair would make a wonderful theater production.⁸⁶ It was a story that seemed tailor-made for stage representation. The Batavia-based daily *Perniagaan*, which published the schedule for Coenraad's murder trial, urged those "who are fond of writing sad stories to be present at the trial."⁸⁷ There was consensus that Riboet's story was material worthy of theater and literary representations, and it was only fitting that a high-profile novelist/journalist like Tan Boen Kim ended up writing the fictionalized version.

In the novel itself, at the very start, Tan concedes that accounts in his story are "plucked from here and there,"⁸⁸ which, one gathers from reading *Si Riboet*, meant a combination of newspaper accounts and word of mouth. He suggests that he reconstructed Riboet's theater career and her troupe's itinerary from newspaper reports. When her troupe played in Mangga Besar, for instance, the horde of fans that

⁸⁴ G. Francis, *Tjerita Njai Dasima: Soewatoe Korban dari pada Pemboedjoek* (Batavia: S.n., 1896). Not coincidentally, Tan Boen Kim commences *Si Riboet* with a theater scene performing the story of Njai Dasima.

⁸⁵ "Hindia Nederland," *Pewarta Soerabaia*, June 17, 1916.

⁸⁶ "Hindia Nederland," *Pewarta Soerabaia*, June 22, 1916.

⁸⁷ "Orang Tjilaka," *Perniagaan*, July 7, 1916.

⁸⁸ Tan, *Si Riboet*, p. 3.

swarmed around its actors was said to be not as large as the group at the previous stop, Glodok, because, Tan told us, the press had castigated the fans with “stinging and racy remarks” (*perkataan pedes dan seroe*).⁸⁹ Her troupe’s visit to Batavia in 1909 was also traced by Tan from press reports. In the novel, Riboet has another “husband” before Samad, also a theater actor, but this man elopes with a Chinese girl from a wealthy family. The girl, Tan writes, “not only gives many expensive things to the *komed* actor, but has also given herself to him.”⁹⁰ The conduct of this “accursed girl” (*prampoean jang terkoetok*), Tan continues, has made the affair a daily subject of diatribes in newspapers read by the Chinese, and this was how, we assume, Tan learned of Riboet’s previous partner. When Riboet’s troupe moved on to Semarang in the following year, the absence of press reports regarding scandalous behavior by female fans led Tan to conclude that (Chinese) women in Semarang were not as morally loose as those in West Java. For this, he applauded the “strength of character of the women in Central Java,” and urged “their journalists to show some appreciation.”⁹¹ All these references to newspaper sources in Tan’s reconstruction of Riboet’s life prior to her association with Coenraad are, however, difficult to verify.

Tan also constructed his story from hearsay. Shortly after Semarang, we are told, “Riboet’s famous name turns up in East Java.”⁹² At that time, according to Tan’s story, she was living in Pasoeroean as a mistress of a wealthy Chinese man, while her troupe was performing there. By this time, the fictional Riboet has fully developed into a famous theater actress, an insatiable materialist, and a cold-hearted lover. She takes advantage of the luxury that Tjoa Liang Tik, her rich patron, provides her—a house, expensive jewelry, cash, car (*auto*), and private chauffeur. He does everything to please her, we are told, with the expectation that, when her troupe is ready to move on, she will stay behind with him in Pasoeroean. But when her troupe departs for Soerabaja, Riboet leaves with it. Tjoa at last realizes that “such a woman shows love only to extract money.”⁹³ In real life, an alleged affair between Riboet and a locally prominent Chinese in Pasoeroean reportedly made them a lasting object of gossip in that town.

In his court defense, Coenraad brought up Riboet’s Chinese lover in Pasoeroean to establish a reprehensible pattern in Riboet’s conduct. Her Chinese lover, Coenraad alleged, had attempted to poison himself after being “drained off” by Riboet.⁹⁴ *Sin Po* made reference to this part of Coenraad’s defense, but other newspapers were curiously silent about it. Tan’s novel does not mention the suicide attempt, but suggests that the novel’s account of the Pasoeroean lover was based on rumor.

In addition to citing rumors and newspaper reports, Tan uses creative imagination to fashion Riboet’s personality. As a journalist, novelist, and legal enthusiast who covered court cases, he was familiar with a method commonly used by trial lawyers, which is to establish a pattern in a person’s past to conjure certain character traits. In the same way, the first two-thirds of Tan’s novel provides readers with a history of

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁹⁴ “Perkara Boenoe di Soerabaja,” *Sin Po*, August 7, 1916.

Riboet's materialism and debauchery to establish her character as shady, manipulative, and prostitute-like.

In the first chapter, for instance, Tan attributes Riboet's motivation to try for a career in theater to her desire for extravagance. She is inspired to become an actress after watching a theater prima donna being showered with money and gifts on stage by her lover-cum-fan.⁹⁵ This acquisitive tendency later on intensifies in conjunction with her theater career. Her escalating fame, we are told, enables her to make "bigger catches." Her only purpose in relationships, Tan supposes, is to extract (*mengeret*) as much profit as possible. That she never really loves her lovers is evident in her quick rejection of ever becoming their concubine (*njai*). The same materialism also affects her initial relationship with Coenraad. Readers first encounter Riboet and Coenraad together as they are leaving a jewelry store, after one of her shopping sprees using his funds. At every turn, Tan details how Coenraad needs to forfeit large amounts of cash in order to win her love, which, in effect, implies that her love is for sale. The death of Riboet's father, in Tan's account, serves as the climax to her intense monetary focus. Her father, we are told, dies of grief after she elopes with an actor and refuses to return home. Upon receiving the letter notifying her of his death, Riboet reacts coldly by "sending home some cash and a letter, stating that it is unnecessary for her to come home" as it is too late for her to attend the funeral.⁹⁶ This episode underscores her selfish materialism.

Aside from being materialistic, Riboet is also described as excessively sexual. As a teenager, she is tricked into a sexual relationship with Tergo, a rascal of a wealthy Eurasian family. But while with Tergo, her first lover, she commences another affair with Sainan, Tergo's servant.⁹⁷ This initial indication of Riboet's sexual appetite ends in tragedy when Tergo discovers the affair and, in a duel, the two young men kill each other. This part of the novel is so overdramatic that it appears to be fictitious, but it sets up Riboet's image as a femme fatale. And her promiscuity, we are told, continues even after she is married. Her first husband, Ali Kabir, is the actor with whom she elopes, and who introduces her to theater life. He, too, is supposedly promiscuous, but Riboet does not object to this because she is preoccupied with her own extramarital affairs. After Ali Kabir's scandalous elopement with a Chinese girl, Riboet "marries" Samad. With Samad, she is portrayed by Tan as not only an adulterous spouse, but also a heartless one, because she carries out her liaisons openly, without care for Samad's feelings. Often, Tan relates, it is Coenraad who feels sorry for Samad.⁹⁸

The nature of Riboet's relationship with Samad as common-law partners is something that was lost in cultural translation. Most newspaper accounts referred to him as her husband. Tan even establishes Riboet's character as that of a callous "wife" by drawing attention to her affair with Coenraad. Tan does not, however, seem to take into account Samad's real-life confession to the court, as reported in *Sin Po*, that "he, in fact, did not love his wife, which was why he did not care to stop the affair."⁹⁹ Samad

⁹⁵ Tan, *Si Riboet*, pp. 3-26.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁹⁹ "Perkara Boenoe di Soerabaja," *Sin Po*, August 7, 1916.

was telling the truth when he declared that he was not (legally) married to Riboet.¹⁰⁰ And both Tan and the press portrayed Samad as a pimp-like character who “let out” Riboet in exchange for pricey paraphernalia that he received from Coenraad. Nevertheless, Samad and Riboet were still described in most accounts as husband and wife. A witness for and friend of Coenraad contended that Riboet and Samad had teamed up for material gains. But when the judge asked Samad why he had let the affair continue, Samad’s response was, “I am afraid of the police officer.” Apparently Coenraad, Samad testified in court, had threatened to detain Riboet if she did not abide by Coenraad’s orders. Samad also revealed that Coenraad had blamed him every time Riboet refused to go out with the officer.

Regardless of Samad’s role and his relationship with Riboet and Coenraad, Tan and the press seemed to agree that Riboet had brought the misfortune upon herself. *Pewarta Soerabaia* concluded its report of the murder with the following remark: “This is what you call a man becoming victim of a theatre actress and the woman being victimized by her own deeds.”¹⁰¹ Riboet, in other words, was responsible for both debacles—Coenraad’s eventual imprisonment and her own death. Tan’s account goes so far as to make her accountability literal. In the novel, Riboet is said to have pledged a “death contract” with Tjoa Liang Tik, her wealthy lover in Pasoeroean. She has sworn that she will be shot to death should her love for him prove untrue. Her eventual slaughter, therefore, is brought about by the curse invoked through her own words.

Though Tan’s novel and press accounts in general offer corresponding representations of Riboet, the indigenous newspaper *Oetoesan Hindia* took a different angle on the case. It castigated Coenraad’s aggression as a crime perpetrated by, ironically, a law enforcement officer. The newspaper, headed by a leader of the nationalist movement, O. S. Tjokroaminoto, questioned the recruitment process that allowed Coenraad to rise to the position of police inspector despite his questionable past. The paper’s editors expressed approval when the court sentenced Coenraad to ten years in prison, two years longer than what the prosecutor had proposed. Dutch newspapers, on the contrary, though less biased than their Chinese counterparts, were inclined to blame Riboet while distancing themselves from Coenraad. The officer’s disgraceful affair with an indigenous woman, his foolishness, which led to his “victimization,” and his irrefutable brutality were unflattering to the self-image of Europeans.

By all accounts, gender bias in the literary and journalistic representations of the Riboet case was unmistakable. *Oetoesan Hindia*’s isolated criticism of Coenraad was predictable because its anticolonial stance overrode its gender prejudices. But this publication was not immune to the widespread (masculine) apprehension with regard to women behaving outside convention. Its previously discussed article on woman’s nature explicitly admits to such uneasiness.¹⁰² *Si Riboet* cashed in on that prevalent perception of women, namely, that they are innately susceptible to corruption, both materially and morally. The young Riboet, we are told, learns about glamour and self-indulgence from other women. Siti Awah, the prima donna of *komedie stamboel* Jap Goan

¹⁰⁰ “Pepreksaan Perkara Pesakitan Coenraad,” *Pewarta Soerabaia*, August 5, 1916.

¹⁰¹ “Hindia Nederland,” *Pewarta Soerabaia*, June 22, 1916.

¹⁰² “Perubahan Alam Perampoean,” *Oetoesan Hindia*, August 12 and 14, 1916.

Thaij, inadvertently introduces Riboet to the allure of theater. Afterwards, it is her mother's naive praise of the glamorous theater life that "plants erroneous seeds in the mind of the daughter."¹⁰³ Two other women contribute to Riboet's "fall from grace" and eventual demise. The first is Mah Timah, "who often leads daughters and wives onto the wrong path."¹⁰⁴ She runs a "pleasure house" and helps Tergo, Riboet's first lover, seduce her. The other is Riboet's neighbor, who acts as matchmaker (without the knowledge of her parents) between Riboet and Ali Kabir, the actor with whom she elopes.

Ultimately, what readers find in *Si Riboet* is a femme fatale. She is the one who brings catastrophe upon herself and all men who cross paths with her. At the conclusion of the novel, after Coenraad is sentenced to ten years in prison, Tan describes him as Riboet's last victim: "Not a few men have met their demise and misfortune because of their association with her."¹⁰⁵ He is the last in a series of men who fall prey to her insatiable desire for material and sexual fulfillment. Three male characters—Tergo, Sainan, and Riboet's father—die because of her. Three other men who have been close to her—Tjoa Liang Tik, Samad, and Coenraad—end up in financial and legal troubles. This roster of victims, in Tan's account, generates at least two effects. First, it takes the image of "Coenraad, the murderer" and sets it in line with other men who have fallen victim to Riboet, and thereby reverses that image into "Coenraad, the victim." Thus, Riboet's position shifts from being a victim herself to being a perpetrator of men's downfall. Second, by presenting Coenraad as her last victim, Tan suggests that he has put an end to her predatory acts and prevented her from victimizing more men. For these reasons, Tan spoke of Coenraad's legal punishment as a "regrettable" thing. Speaking on behalf of men, particularly Chinese men who habitually "fell victim" to theater beauties, Tan expressed explicit sympathy for and implicit gratitude to Coenraad. Riboet's death, from his point of view, was not only justified, it saved other men from becoming future victims.

Conclusions

Tan's defense of Coenraad and other journalists' denunciation of Riboet suggest a curious affinity among men, and between men and public discourse. It is a solidarity that, in Tan's formulation, stems from Riboet's mistreatment of her lovers. It demonstrates a system of male alliance that is instituted and perpetuated by society and its "customs," so as to sustain the patriarchal order.¹⁰⁶ As we have discussed, agents of patriarchal order are not limited to men; the discourse of the family also works constantly to activate the paternal signifier.¹⁰⁷ In the case of the Chinese-Malay Decadent novels, through notions of "parental" concerns over daughters adopting new value systems, the symbolic patriarch attempts to retain his cultural primacy. Tan's biased portrayal in *Si Riboet* of a professional and sexually liberated woman and her

¹⁰³ Tan, *Si Riboet*, p. 24.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁰⁶ Luce Irigaray designates this as a "homosexual" relationship; see her book *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

¹⁰⁷ Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 189.

victimized men was not uncharacteristic. It is illustrative of a larger trend in Chinese-Malay literature of the period. A good number of other works reflect similar concerns. And the fact that the Chinese-Malay works were in unison with the symbolic father proves that the patriarchal order also operates through signifiers such as “authors,” “journalists,” and even “literature.” In other words, both literature and the press were institutional supports for the constitution and perpetuation of the patriarchal order.

As an agent of patriarchal order, the Chinese-Malay version of *femme fatale* offers identification and denial. It features women who step out of customary roles and habitat by taking on Western education, reading foreign novels, eloping with lovers, or becoming professionals. It takes after Flaubert, an icon of European Decadent literature, and his protagonist in *Madame Bovary*. Emma Bovary is described as a passionate reader of romantic novels, which, in effect, come to structure her desire.¹⁰⁸ In the books she reads, “Emma constantly discovers familiar ideas and images.” As each reading is, in effect, a re-reading, what Emma finds in her books is rather a confirmation of her thoughts and desires. In other words, romantic novels hold out to their readers the possibility of identification. The Chinese-Malay novels, too, were designed to operate in the same manner. They catered in particular to men, but also to literate women—that is, to women with school education. Like Flaubert, the Chinese authors make it possible for women readers to identify with the protagonist. But then they proceed to press for denial. The readers’ feelings of identification, upon recognizing familiar thoughts and desires, are supposed to be immediately renounced when the protagonist meets her tragic end as the story draws to a close. The morals of these stories are rarely ambiguous. They were written, as their subtitles often announce, to serve as a mirror, a warning, a lesson.

Sensational stories such as Riboet’s murder evidently had high commodity value. Riboet herself proved to have durable commercial appeal. In the mid-1920s, a theater troupe named Miss Riboet Orion Opera gained popularity in the Indies. Its prima donna was known as “Miss Riboet,” and her fame extended beyond the borders of the Dutch colony. She had best-selling gramophone recordings, and her troupe toured as far as British Malaya.¹⁰⁹ One understands that this “Miss Riboet,” who rose to fame approximately one decade after Riboet’s tragic death, is using “Riboet” as a stage name. This curious appropriation might have resulted from Riboet’s murder being heavily publicized and made a lasting subject of public conversation.¹¹⁰ Riboet’s story had become a commodity that simultaneously induced curiosity and guaranteed good sales. The newspaper reports and Tan’s novel *Si Riboet* were undeniably conditioned by this commercial context, but they should not be perceived solely from this angle. The curious connections between Chinese-Malay “pulp fiction” and European Decadent literature demand that we also look for and look from other points of reference. I suggest that we look at their alternative aesthetics, which went against the conventional form of literature as beautiful writing (*belles lettres*); at the tensions between adopting (by male authors) and denouncing (for female readers) Western

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 161–62.

¹⁰⁹ Minah Alias, one of the Malay *komedi* performers Tan Sooi Beng interviewed for her book, *Bangsawan*, recounted her experience of being sent to Java for an apprenticeship with Miss Riboet’s troupe. There she studied dance, music, and acting for ten years.

¹¹⁰ Tan, *Si Riboet*, p. 110.

literary influences; at the literary elements and devices being appropriated; and at the localities retained.