

## Popular Literature and Colonial Society in Late-Nineteenth-Century Java—*Cerita Nyai Dasima*, the Macabre Story of an Englishman's Concubine\*

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### Introduction

This paper examines the short novel entitled *Cerita Nyai Dasima* written by G. Francis (1860–1915) and published by Kho Tjeng Bie & Co. of Batavia in 1896. Through this work I shall focus on the world of popular literature during that time within the context of urban society, in order to investigate the relationship between literature and social order in a country under colonial rule.

Francis wrote *Cerita Nyai Dasima* in everyday, colloquial Malay (or Pasar-Malay), which, incidentally, developed into the “language of national liberation” along with the growth of the nationalist movement in the early twentieth century and then became the official language of the state of Indonesia. The background of the novel contains interesting and peculiar elements. First, we know that the author was of English descent, but neither his family nor career background is very clear. We are not even sure that his real name was Francis. However, we do know that he was on the editorial staff of the Malay newspaper *Pengadilan*, which circulated in the high plains city of

Bandung. Later he moved to Batavia (present-day Jakarta) and became involved in editing a Malay magazine. Also, in 1891 he published in Batavia a biography of Napoleon. Therefore, we can at least piece together that he was a journalist living and working in a torrid zone under Dutch colonial rule, that he was fluent in Malay, and that he used that language to express a number of opinions about the conditions of colonial society.

Turning to the novel itself, which is the tragic story of a Sundanese woman named Dasima, who becomes an Englishman's *nyai*, or concubine, we can confidently state that it was a literary work born from definite “hybrid” conditions, given that 1) it was written in Malay by a white foreigner whose native language was not Malay, 2) it was distributed through a Chinese publisher, and 3) it circulated in an ethnically mixed, late-nineteenth-century Dutch colonial city.

The theme of popular literature has over the years been virtually ignored in the conventional histories of Indonesian literary movements. It has been treated as a something low class genre of suspect and shady origins, to be placed in an altogether different category both from the traditional literature and classical literary style that characterize the Malay and Javan court chronicles, and from the modern, “ortho-

\* This paper was originally published in Japanese in the journal *Bungaku* 57 (July 1989): 48–63.

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dox" nationalist literature. This lack of research initiative means that there are very few source materials today that could help us trace the origins and development of this popular literary genre. The novels making up this enormous body of literature were all relegated to either the miscellaneous reading section or the lending corner of the book market and thus became scattered willy nilly throughout the city and subsequently lost for want of systematized collecting or preservation activities. This is indeed unfortunate, for as researchers the world over now know, popular literature is an important source of information on previously unknown aspects of literary and social history. Fortunately, however, we do have *Cerita Nyai Dasima*, a late-nineteenth-century popular literary gem that has continued to be read and talked about up to the present day.

In the sections that follow, I shall describe briefly the story contained in the novel, examine its content, and finally consider its aftermath in terms of how it was received by the society that read it and how popular ideas about the story changed over time. In this way I hope not only to discuss one particular work of popular literature, but also give the reader some insights into the social and cultural history of Indonesia.

## I Synopsis

*Cerita Nyai Dasima* is a short novel of nine thousand words, covering thirty-nine pages (including two illustrations) in the first edition.<sup>1)</sup>

1) The novel was first published as *Tjerita Njai Dasima*, by G. Francis [1896]. The original style of text has been preserved in Pramoedya Ananta Toer [1982: 223-247].

The following is an English translation of the first forty-three lines (three paragraphs) of the original text, which, interestingly, contains only five sentence-ending periods, the remaining clauses and phrases being compounded and set off by commas and semicolons. This seems to indicate a style reflecting a process of transition from oral narration into written prose.

This is a story. It is said that about 1813 an Englishman administered Tanah Curcuk in the district of Tangerang. His name was Edward W. He was not very old and he had a concubine, a *nyai*, who was a Muslim girl from Kampung Kuripan, called Dasima. The gentleman had kept the *nyai* from the time she was a girl. She was very beautiful. Her skin was fair and her hair was long. Willingly she had studied all the things a woman should know—cooking, sewing and dressmaking—from Mrs. Bonnet, who also happened to be living at Curcuk. Dasima was a diligent and intelligent person.

Mr. W loved her as though she were his legal wife. He entrusted the care of all his property to her. Dasima had even given him a pretty girl, named Nancy. Mr. W was very fond of Nancy. So he gladly bought the *nyai* all sorts of things, like cameo brooches, diamond pins, ornamented boxes and gold jewelry, each worth over 3,000 guilder. Besides that, he gave her a hundred guilder a month to spend. She kept the money in a piggy-box, which she stored with the numerous items of clothing she had accumulated, such things as jackets, sarongs, with gold and silver thread woven through them, and

various types of silk blouses. Her master never minded her having these things in the least.

Some eight years later the land was sold and became the property of another landlord. Mr. W ceased to manage the estate and moved to Batavia. He settled at Gambir, near the bank of the Ciliwung, and found a position with an English shop in Kota. Each day he went to work early, and returned home after five o'clock.

Within two years, Nyai Dasima's fame had spread throughout the nearby Muslim settlements. Everyone knew that she was both beautiful and rich, the possessor of much money and jewelry. A great many Muslim men wanted to get close to her, so they could gain control of her wealth, and sent older women to her to plead their case. Nyai Dasima did not like their proposals and always angrily sent the old women away. Unfortunately she never told her master of these evil proposals. She kept them a secret. No one else at all knew about them.

At that time, a young Muslim man named Samiun lived in Kampung Pejambon. He too had heard how rich and beautiful Nyai Dasima was. Although he had tried various strategies to win her, none of them had come to anything. Samiun therefore decided on a new scheme. He ordered an old woman who lived nearby, namely Ma Buyung, to come to his house. [Francis 1988: 2-3]

The story continues as Samiun offers the smart old woman 50 pasmat (piaster) to persuade Dasima to follow the teachings of Islam

with more sincerity. Ma Buyung becomes a housekeeper for Dasima and works very hard to gain her trust. Then the old woman begins to urge Dasima towards the ways of Islam. Her guides in this endeavor are to be none other than Samiun's mother, Saleha, and his wife, Hayati. Then Samiun is able to approach Dasima in order to convey his sentiments toward her, telling her that he has been deeply in love with her for a long time. Meanwhile, Buyung continues to collect strands of Dasima's hair, and when they have been wound into the size of an egg, she gives the bundle to Samiun for 2 pasmat. Samiun then takes the hair to the famed witch doctor, Haji Salihun, in the Pecanongan area and asks him to produce a "potion" for the price of 10 pasmat. Haji Salihun makes two kinds of potions: one that will make Dasima hate Edward W and one that will make Mr. W do anything Dasima wishes.

During this time Mr. W dreams that a long black snake attacks his Nyai Dasima and "cuts" her throat, despite his desperate efforts to help.

Meanwhile, Dasima is repeatedly urged to break off with Mr. W if indeed she is to embrace Islam sincerely. She finally decides to cut off all relations with Mr. W and marry Samiun, who, she believes, is deeply in love with her. One day, Dasima tells Mr. W that she is leaving and taking all of her belongings except for Nancy, whom she has decided to leave with him. The poor gentleman tries to persuade her not to go, but his efforts are in vain, for she says, "Saya tiada harep masuk agama kafir" (I don't want to become a kafir, an infidel). The next day Dasima departs taking with her property totaling 6,000 florins.

The story now enters its second phase. One

month after Dasima marries Samiun, he becomes the owner of all her property, an event which marks a crucial turning point in her life. She is no longer blinded by all of Samiun's attention and flattery, but, on the contrary, begins to feel uneasy and embarrassed due mainly to Hayati's jealousy and manipulation of her. When Dasima begins to be treated like one of Samiun's servants, she finally understands for the first time that what is happening to her stems from a deliberate plan to *prampok* (rob) her of her property. She begs Samiun to return the property, but is flatly refused. Samiun then decides to murder her and contracts Puasa, a *jago* (outlaw) from Kwitang, to do the job for 100 pasmat. From this time on, a bird comes to Dasima everyday and sings to her, "Dasima, run away from here, or else you will die."

One dark night, Dasima is escorted by Samiun to a recital of Amir Hamza's poetry, but Puasa is waiting for them at a bridge. As the hired killer attacks Dasima, she cries out for Samiun to help her. His reply is "Ajal lu sudah sampe, biar pasrahken diri saja!" (Now it is the end of your hour, just surrender to your fate). The murder of Dasima is cruel. Her left eye is gouged out, her throat cut, and the body thrown into the river. However, Tuhan (the almighty God) sees all that has transpired and causes Dasima's body, untouched by fish or crocodile, to flow downstream to Mr. W's house. The story ends with all the parties involved in the murder plot arrested and imprisoned.

## II The Novel's Background

*Cerita Nyai Dasima* is a work that appeared very early in the development of Malay popular

literature. The title of the first printing actually reads something like "The Story of Nyai Dasima, a Victim of Cajolement. Being a Most Pleasant Narrative of Events Taking Place Not Long Ago in Batavia, Which May Serve as a Lesson to All Women Who Put Their Faith in the Flattery of Men, and an Admonition to Young Girls." It seems from such a title that the novel was written with the intention of driving home a moral, but this moralizing tone is only a superficial aspect. Far more important is its non-fictional, almost reportive writing style, since this "objective" way of telling a story, whether in a moralizing tone or not, is common to all the novels of Malay popular literature. Before going into the nature of this genre in more detail, let us look at the general conditions and features of late-nineteenth-century popular fiction in colonial Java.

### 1. *The Appearance of the Malay Newspaper*

The first medium for Malay literary writing in colonial urban areas, beginning with Batavia, was the Malay newspaper. These began to be published in the middle of the nineteenth century. While the circumstances surrounding the formation of the Malay press were by no means the same for all newspapers, many were no doubt edited and published by either Dutch or Eurasian groups with participation of Peranakans, Chinese born in the colonies, who had been almost completely assimilated into the local culture. Native Indonesian participation in the Malay press did not begin until after the turn of the century.

The language situation was complicated by the fact that nineteenth-century Malay, rather than belonging exclusively to indigenous Malay ethnic groups, was rather the *lingua franca* of

the melange of nationalities and cultural groups living together in the colonial cities. For this reason it was the non-native speakers of Malay—the Dutch, Eurasian and Peranakan urban residents—who first saw the market potential of Malay as a print medium.

The appearance of Malay newspapers naturally led to the formation and development of a Malay popular literary genre. First, the publication of these newspapers created a market for Malay written in Roman letters. Until then, Malay had been universally written in Arabic script (the so-called *jawi* orthography). The appearance of romanized Malay, however, allowed a much larger and more diversified number of cultural groups to claim the Malay newspaper as its source of information.

Secondly, the Malay actually used here, and even more so in such novels as *Cerita Nyai Dasima*—a language which has been described as “market Malay,” “Batavian Malay,” and “low Malay”—was a colloquial language far removed from the “high Malay” of the great tradition that formed the rich court culture of the Malacca kingdom from the fifteenth century. The circumstances under which this everyday, colloquial language came into print were closely related to the development of a broad-based, mass market for the Malay newspapers, and were instrumental in creating a language medium and style for the popular novel.

Thirdly, the involvement of Peranakans in Malay newspapers at an early stage allowed this group to make significant contributions to the development of the print media culture in Indonesia. Because members of this social group were scattered all over the colonies, they became the most influential force in the publishing market that spread along with the development

of the urban network. Moreover, through the wider network of the foreign Chinese community in Southeast Asia they advanced the dissemination of a “translation culture” throughout the whole region. Their most important contribution lay in the formation of a cultural market network for the publishing business.

Fourthly, from among the pioneers of the Malay newspaper business arose an important group of professional journalists, who built the foundations of a Malay publishing culture, while also leaving a number of popular literary works and materials translated from other languages.

Finally, and most importantly, is the role played by the writing that appeared in the early Malay press. According to C. W. Watson, one of the few scholars who has taken the time to do research in this area, the Malay newspapers in addition to their advertising copy and press releases, also provided literary pieces for their readers [Watson 1971: 423–424]. For example, there were items from Malay classical literature, the *Hikayat* court chronicles re-written in the colloquial style, as well as selections from *Thousand and One Nights' Entertainment*, *Aesop's Fables* and various works of mythology involving the nefarious deeds of demons and the heroic exploits of kings. There were also travel journals written by Europeans who had been to such spots within the colonial borders as Kalimantan. Nevertheless, what Watson finds particularly interesting in these newspapers is the reporting of the various sensational incidents that would occur here and there throughout the colonies. This reporting would cover the crime stories—the murders, rapes, infidelity, fraud, armed robberies, etc.—scandals happening in the real world, that would later form the most important plots for fictional renditions in the

developing genre of popular literature.

## 2. *The Role of Translation in the Formation of Popular Literature*

Malay popular literature made its appearance contemporaneously with the spread of Malay newspapers. It first came on the scene in the form of translations of best sellers from both East and West, which in Batavia alone included *Robinson Crusoe* in 1875, *The Adventures of Sinbad* in 1876, *Thousand and One Nights' Entertainment* in 1886, *Around the World in Eighty Days* in 1890, the *Sanguozhi* (三国志) in 1893, and *Count of Monte Cristo* between 1894 and 1899.

Then, under the conditions already discussed, the genre of original Malay popular novels, including *Cerita Nyai Dasima*, appeared on the scene and continued to increase in number into the twentieth century, as a greater diversity of literary works circulated through the book market. I will leave a detailed discussion of each of these fictional veins for later papers; however, in all of them we can recognize a number of similarities in terms of both literary form and content. And the most representative work for showing these similarities is none other than *Nyai Dasima*. In the sections that follow I would like to discuss what can be called this novel's "classic" or "prototype" nature by going once again over story's plot.

### III Characteristics of *Nyai Dasima*

#### 1. *The World of the Nyai*

As we have seen, *Nyai Dasima* was written in the narrative style of a novel based on a "true story." And so we can read it as any crime or picaresque literary work that originated from

real events. In addition, the inclusion of the element of the *nyai* lends a special kind of intrigue to the tale.

Keeping a *nyai* was a very widespread practice in colonial society up until the middle of the nineteenth century. It was only from the 1870s, after the building of the Suez Canal, that Dutch colonists began to bring their families with them and form a European bourgeois living environment replete with summer homes, tennis courts, swimming pools, exclusive residential areas "enclosed in mimosa and bougainvillea," parties that included the guests' families, Western schools for the children, hospitals and rest homes, aquariums, the theatre, musical concerts, family vacations, friendly auctions, etc. Until that time, colonial life was mainly men's business, which in many instances meant keeping a *nyai*, for single and married men alike. One consequence to this custom was the proliferation of Eurasian offspring. Moreover, the *nyai* tended to be more than just a sexual partner, playing also the role of and demanding the respect afforded to a "housekeeper" dressed in a white uniform and slippers.

From the story, we know that *Dasima* was indeed this kind of *nyai*, a beautiful native-born woman with the ability to handle her master's domestic affairs, thus placing her within the ruling white man's world. In this sense, the *nyai* found herself in an ambivalent social position, either by virtue of her unclear status vis-a-vis her master or by the fact that she belonged to both worlds: white and brown. Indeed, we could say the same thing about the social group formed by the subjects of colonial society in general and the residents of the colonial city in particular. For both the Eurasians and Peranakans, as well as for the Dutch

rulers themselves, the colonies represented only a "place of temporary residence." All of these groups in one way or another were made up of "people bereft of a homeland," and the *nyai* was their most poignant symbolic figure.

The culture that was either created or adopted by these "homeless" groups never really belonged completely to any single one of them, and for this reason it was a culture that would have to be borne through the participation of all of them. In other words, in late-nineteenth-century Batavia we can discern a culture with no classical form, its origins being so vague and unclear, living on only because it was profitable (i.e., the only vehicle for the proliferation of a social marketplace). It was a culture that gave rise to the "hybrid" Keroncong musical form and the musical play performances of the Komedi Stambul. Without going into detail, these two artistic forms were links in a phenomenon which can be called "mestizo" culture,<sup>2)</sup> and which forms the same set of circumstances in which Malay popular literature also grew and flourished. For example, the diverse cultural conditions which we discussed in relation to the publication of *Nyai Dasima* shows well the mestizo nature of the work.

Returning to the predicament of the *nyai*, the newspapers of the time were faithful in reporting and sensationalizing the incidents involving these kept women, and we can also observe the development of a distinct category of popular novel that can be called "*nyai* tales." The fact that these women frequently appeared in the press does not mean that they were forever

linked to crime and scandal, but rather suggests that their existence appealed deeply to the curiosity of readers. From the 1870s, as the "proper and wholesome" Dutch family lifestyle took form in the colonial cities, the keeping of *nyai* began to be looked down upon and openly criticized. Subsequently, the practice waned, but never died out completely. Moreover, as the social outcry heightened, the more scandalous the practice became and, naturally, the more people became attracted to the *nyai* and her world [Oshikawa 1986a: 72]. Even if we read *Nyai Dasima* as a novel about the victimization of women, the descriptions of how this beautiful woman was spied upon, tricked, tortured, stripped of her wealth and finally brutally murdered still indicate the clearly distorted interest that the reading public had in the world of the *nyai*.

Colonial urban society tends to become highly stratified with socially and culturally diverse groups, in the same way as a surface blackened by the build-up of coat upon coat of different paints. In such a situation, contexts like the world of the *nyai* can usually be placed exactly where the psychological and emotional build-up within such a hierarchy is thickest. For this reason the *nyai* can be rightfully called the symbol of the late-nineteenth-century colonial city, with its uprootedness, chaos and vulgarity.

## 2. *The Macabre Aspect*

One more theme that permeates *Nyai Dasima* is a horrid uneasiness verging on the macabre. One gets the feeling of a psychological ambivalence running through the work that expresses a terrible loathing and fear for the horror that is happening, but nevertheless continues to draw the reader helplessly into it.

2) I have covered these points in Tsuchiya [1988; 1986].

First, the cold, stoic writing style that we saw in the first few paragraphs—lining up fact after fact in long reportive, periodless compound sentences—cannot help but lead the reader into a very tense situation, in which whatever happens must happen, completely beyond the author's control. Then come the superficial promises, the trickery, the unrelenting pursuit of the prey, the nightmares and the bird's foreboding, the bigotry and hatred towards the "heathen," the threats and intimidation, the secret rites and magic potions, the jealousy, the cajolement, the world of the outlaw, the unnecessarily cruel violence, then the murder and disposal of the body, which floats aimlessly down the river.

In attempting to ferret out the origins of such a story and setting, one could probably first try to gather together synchronically the influences exerted by translations of foreign literature, and then proceed in tying together the indigenous elements from the traditional tales of Java. For example, Mr. W's dream and the bird's report of bad tidings are old standbys in the world of Javan tales and legends, while Puasa the hired killer reminds one of the murderous demons that run amuck in the island's Wayang shadow plays. But I think it is more important to focus our attention on *Nyai Dasima* as a work created from the Malay colloquial writing style that was popular in late-nineteenth-century Batavia.

First, with regard to the macabre aspects of the novel, A. Day, one of the foremost experts on nineteenth-century Javan literature, has come up with the interesting concept of *kaelokan*, which may be helpful in explaining this work of popular literature as a phenomenon of urban colonial society [Day 1981: 262–264].

*Kaelokan* derives from *elok*, an abstract noun

meaning 'marvelous', 'wonderous', or 'mysterious'. *Kaelokan* are divine mysteries which manifest themselves in the material world, where they are recognized as such. According to Day, the mid-nineteenth-century newspaper *Bramartani*, which was published in Surakarta, the old capital in central Java, "frequently reported visions, strange deformities, spirit visitations and the like, most of which occurred in villages rather than in the city of Surakarta itself," under the heading of *kaelokan*. Day concludes his argument by attempting to relate these tales of the fantastic to the psychological conditions of their readers. In other words, these tales appeared in a newspaper which was edited, read, contributed and subscribed to by the Dutch, Eurasian and small, "westernized" segment of the Javanese aristocratic elite living in Surakarta, a mid-nineteenth-century ruling class culturally situated somewhere between "the primitive spirit world of Java" and "the modernity of nineteenth century Europe." These people were drawn into the world of *kaelokan* manifestations (i.e. the world of the macabre) by feelings of "impotence," or "the racial unease and bad conscience inherent in the structure of its own unprecedented plurality."

In sum, first a "modernized readership" of newspapers and books was born from this cultural plurality of the colonial city, and secondly, this readership was drawn emotionally into a literary world of things which could be understood by neither the modern intellect nor modern rationalism.<sup>3)</sup> Moreover, if even in Surakarta,

3) As a matter of fact, the *kaelokan* world, symbolized by secret potions and spells, appears even in the works of Dutch authors who based their stories on events occurring in the colonies, the classic treatment being Louis Couppers' *De Stille Kracht* [The Hidden Force].



which represented the seat of classical Javan court culture, we can clearly see *kaelokan* literature rendering the psyche into two worlds of the traditional and the modern, then in other cities without such a conservative, counterbalancing force, the degree of psychological fission must have been far more extreme. Therefore, we can easily imagine that within the socially volatile city of Batavia, the *kaelokan* genre and the readers' response to it must both have been the most developed of all. Indeed, the Batavian-published *Nyai Dasima* is the classic *kaelokan* novel replete with unnerving, horrid uneasiness and the macabre.

### 3. *Trembling Fear and Abhorrence*

However, the world of *Nyai Dasima* is not only unnerving to the reader, but is also connected with fear, abhorrence and vindictiveness. The fear arises out of the "unknown, unseen power" lurking in the secret potions and poisons, out of the brute force (robbery and murder) perpetrated on Dasima, and most strongly out of the fear of being surrounded and hopelessly caught in a throng of thousands of completely anonymous people. These three states of fear are all very powerful psychological phenomena, and for that reason are directly connected to feelings of revulsion and hate. What they together demonstrate is a complete and thorough cognitive picture of the world represented by Samiun, Dasima's seducer. The trickery and criminality are not conceived of as representing disorder and chaos, but are rather recognized as lending order to the state of things through the means of money and wealth. This cognition is consistent to a fault, right down to the last guilder, for it is the language of florins and piasters (modern-day "dollars and

sense") through which the Samiuns of this world communicate with each other. Without the structural support of this pecuniary coherence, the story would never have gotten past the first page.

But that is not all: money is what ties the world of Samiun, Dasima's malefactor, to that of Mr. W, her benefactor. In this sense *Nyai Dasima* is actually a story relating the process of how the former plots to steal the wealth of the latter. Even Dasima's personal beauty becomes a mere accessory to the monetary wealth she possesses. We can even go so far as to say that the scene of penniless Dasima's horribly beaten corpse returning in the end to Mr. W is symbolic of the basic function of wealth itself.<sup>4)</sup>

And so the seemingly unbridgeable gap that separates the worlds of Samiun and Mr. W begins to close, as each side approaches the other in a dialogue spoken through the "medium of exchange," or money. This situation is the fundamental characteristic of all the "plural societies" (Furnivall) that were formed in the colonies of Southeast Asia. That is to say, those social groups that lived side by side within the same geographic space, bereft of any common culture or ultimate purpose, characteristically created channels of communication dominated exclusively by exchanges of goods and services through the medium of monetary currency.

### 4. *The Readership: Inside and Outside "the Enclosure"*

The above discussion now leads us to one more important point that requires considera-

4) The symbolism that is evident here was pointed out to me by Kashimura Akio.

tion in analyzing *Nyai Dasima*, namely, the relationship between the world depicted within the story and the story's readership. There appears in this a delicate and critical balance between the fictional space created by the author in his storytelling and the real environment in which the novel was read.

Those who read and enjoyed popular literary works written in Malay constituted the first wave of a racially mixed group of "modern readers" that populated the colonial city. By "modern readers" I mean that they were a group able to communicate personally with the novels' authors through the print media, which they read quietly in their living rooms and bedrooms. They were the first generation of the new "urban bourgeoisie," who from the latter half of the nineteenth-century experienced a change in the form of their literary enjoyment from stories that were read aloud (the world of the storyteller) to stories that were read in silence.

However, looking at the environment of the "modern reader" within the context of colonial society as a whole, we can observe the existence of an enclosed space similar to small island in the sea. The waters that surrounded and enclosed this island were a sea of humanity made up of thousands of Samiuns.

Actually, the establishment of a colonial urban environment rested upon the formation of such enclosures; and the "order and peace" ("*rust en orde*") that characterized the colonialized territory depended upon the smooth functioning of a network that tied together all of these separate enclosures as the system itself expanded and diffused. But no matter how smoothly the network functioned, the sea of humanity surrounding these enclosures continued to grow.

The reader was thus exposed to stories about the "outside" world from inside his secure colonial enclosure. And it was at that exact moment that the reader and characters like *Dasima*, the concubine, approached one other and become inextricably superimposed. This point is closely related to what I said previously about how *Nyai Dasima* can be read as a "novel of victimization or masochism." What I mean here is that we can see a story forming in which the heroine, who is safely ensconced in a colonial enclosure, gradually experiences her world crumbling all around and then has it totally collapse beneath her. Here the interior and exterior of the "enclosure" are tied into a one-sided relationship of "victim" and "perpetrator." The typical working out of this relationship, which is symbolized in the perils of *Dasima*, was no doubt quickly recognized and superimposed upon the actual psychological conditions of the novel's first readers.

One more aspect is that the novel is set in 1813, eighty years in the past (from the first printing), and so it becomes a tale of an era far removed from the "*rust en orde*" of late-nineteenth-century Dutch colonial society—inviting nostalgia as well as a sense of how "we have progressed" over the years. On the other hand, if, by looking at the situation in terms of spatial relationships, we correct for the historical time difference between *Dasima* and the reader in 1896, we find that the "enclosure" separating the reader on the inside from *Dasima* on the outside is a very thin, weak barrier, verging on collapse. This is the delicate balance mentioned earlier that is established between the space (setting) in which the story was created and the space in which the story was actually read. What is presented, therefore, is

not a novel whose world has been set in the nostalgic past, but rather a story that engulfs the reader in “the here and now” and psychologically reinforces the fact that the “enclosure” is capable of breaking down at any time.

Taking this point a little further, we can say that *Nyai Dasima* and similar stories were expressions of the emotional discontent that pervaded the urban colonial atmosphere and, moreover, the first signs of the bloodcurdling horror in which those within the enclosure would soon find themselves caught up—a set of circumstances that would start the “sea of humanity” churning and finally building into a tidal wave of nationalist and people’s liberation movements during the twentieth century.

#### IV The Development of the Story

After its initial publication in 1896, the story of *Dasima* the concubine spread even wider through Indonesian society in a number of different forms that included not only the print medium, but also the stage, popular music, and the movies.

Within the print medium alone, at least four versions of the story were published in addition to the original novel. They are :

- 1) A work composed by a Chinese poet in verse form and put out the following year in Batavia by a Chinese publisher [Tjiang 1897].
- 2) A version written in Dutch by a writer of possible Eurasian descent named Manusama, who is also known for his work on such forms of colonial popular culture as Keroncong music and the Komedi Stambul players. This version was published in

Batavia in 1926 [Manusama 1926].

- 3) An original screenplay for a movie, which was written by an Indonesian author and published in Jakarta in 1940 [Palindih 1940].
- 4) An original piece done after Independence, which seems to have been intended as a script for the theatre. The author, Ardan, graduated from a Taman Siswa private school and became a member of the nationalist movement. It was published in Jakarta in 1965 [Ardan 1965].

Needless to say, the fact of one story being written and published five different times in various forms and with varied content over more than half a century is indeed a rare occurrence in the literary history of Indonesia, and shows well how deeply the story of *Dasima*, the fated concubine, permeated popular culture during that period.

The story also makes a number of appearances in other literary works, like an autobiographical piece by Du Perron, which contains a scene depicting the performance of a popular song about *Dasima* [Du Perron 1984: 86]. In *Bumi Manusia*, a contemporary novel by Pramoedya, the heroine is seen reading *Nyai Dasima* (probably the original version) at night alone in the privacy of her bedroom [Pramoedya 1986: 126–127].

These examples show how the story of *Dasima* went beyond print media readers and spread throughout society, or rather how the popularity of the original inspired the creation of a series of newly published spin-offs of the same story.

## V How the Story Evolved

One important factor within the development of *Nyai Dasima* is, of course, the revisions that were made to the story line every time a new version was released. We can outline the major changes that occurred in the content by looking at the 1940 screenplay and the 1965 script by Ardan.

### 1. *The 1940 Screenplay*

As with most movie adaptations, the setting diverges considerably from the original. Here, Dasima is the very happy wife of a wealthy Indonesian businessman by the name of Winata and has a full-blooded Indonesian daughter. However, Dasima is faced with two problems. One is the enmity that has developed between her father and her husband, the other is the jealousy shown by her neighbors towards her life of luxury. A poison-tongued old woman appears and proceeds to slander Winata, to the point of causing a domestic rift, which leads ultimately to divorce. Dasima returns to her father, and that is when she meets Samiun, a gambler who hangs out with a low-life type named Puasa. Samiun is taken by both Dasima's beauty and fortune, and through the wiles of the smart old woman, Buyung, he succeeds in marrying her. What follows is the squandering of Dasima's fortune and her victimization by Samiun's family. Realizing that she has been cruelly tricked, she reminisces about the life she had with Winata and her daughter and is overcome by enormous feelings of guilt. But at the same time she comes to the conclusion that her life then, like now, has been nothing more than that of a lovely doll kept as an ornament in a glass enclosed showcase.

The story continues with Dasima running away from Samiun and being attacked and murdered by Puasa. Learning of this, Winata vows revenge on Samiun and his sleazy cohort. In the end the villains are arrested, tried and given life sentences, while Samiun's family become social outcasts forced to go out and beg for a living. Buyung is committed to a mental hospital, where she is given to endless babbling day and night for the rest of her days.

In this, the movie version, which plays out more like a TV melodrama that the whole family can watch, the mysterious *kaelokan* elements of magic potions, incantations and forebodings are completely missing, as is the fear and loathing of local "native" society in general and the Muslim community in particular.

One more way in which this presentation differs with the original novel is Dasima's "awakening" to what has happened to her. The movie version depicts that moment in a motif that might have been taken right out of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and it becomes the climactic point of the story. This awakening is shown as an inner reflection by a "modern individual" of the contradictions and conflicts in her life, and thus turns Dasima into a classic melodramatic heroine freed by the screenwriter from her original *nyai* tincture. Furthermore, the cruel punishments dealt out to the villains, who have defied public "order and peace," have been cleverly designed to place the story safely *within* the context of the "colonial establishment."

### 2. *The 1965 Script*

This version was first written as a three-act theatre drama, and is faithful to Francis's original novel in both the setting and the interper-

sonal relationships. What gives this version its particular flavor is the completely different roles given to the characters.

Samiun is a young, happy-go-lucky horse-cart driver, who picks Dasima's daughter, Nancy, up from school every day. Buyung is Dasima's elderly housekeeper, but she is from the same town (Kwitang) as Samiun. Dasima visits Kwitang often with Buyung, and in this way she is removed from the world of Mr. W. In one soliloquy Dasima turns to the audience and says, "I would like to live here in Kwitang. I have made so many friends here in this bustling town, that it makes me want to live again among my own people. I don't understand the language of my husband's homeland. He frightens me so, especially when he becomes angry."

Dasima decides to leave her husband's house and settle down in Kwitang, where she is soon wed to Samiun. And even though she is encumbered with the habitual gambling and cruelty of Hayati, Samiun's first wife, she is much happier living in Kwitang. "I have so many friends here. They are all my people." Meanwhile, her fear of Mr. W builds. "I am frightened of his vengeance. He will never allow things to remain as they are now." In other words, the object of Dasima's fear and hatred is completely reversed from the original novel.

In the final scene, Puasa, the hoodlum, is hired by Mr. W to kill Dasima in cold blood. And when he is arrested for the crime, he claims Samiun as his accomplice. But the good people of Kwitang rise up and insist on Samiun's innocence, at the same time condemning the malice of Mr. W and expressing their deep sorrow for luckless, poor Dasima. Finally, the events cause Hayati to reflect on her wicked ways and go through a change of heart.

This script can be read as a classic case of the kind of scenario that the tale of Dasima might be expected to follow in the context of contemporary Indonesia. Samiun is a well-liked young man and Buyung an even-tempered old housekeeper, while the criminal element arises out of the lust for revenge carried by Dasima's master, who not even once appears on stage. Dasima repeats the cliché "my beloved people" over and over again in her monologues. There is no place for black magic potions and spells, and we do not see Dasima's realization that "I have been just a helpless doll." The world of the tale merely floats along aimlessly, devoid of an opportunity for reflection on its consequences by the characters.

This scenario does not make for powerful literary expression, as the original "poison in the pen" of Francis is neutralized with a large dose of "moralizing" antidote. In spite of this, the way in which the motifs are turned upside down and the unabashed nature in which the characters are depicted makes this work particularly interesting in trying to understand the evolution of the tale of Dasima. The three major versions of the tale that have come out since the publication of the original can be read as various phases in the gradual process of deciding where, socially, to place the *nyai*, who existed within the pluralistic society of colonial times as an ambivalent figure incapable of belonging to any one group.

First, in the original novel we get an unabashed view of the fear and hatred felt towards the world which surrounded Dasima. Then in the 1940s, which marked the beginning of the end to colonial rule, Dasima appears as "modern man," whose body alone belongs to a world of universalized value. Finally, in 1965, twenty

years after National Independence, Dasima is rescued and embraced by the good folk of Kwitang, and announces in unabashed fashion that "these are my people." This process is none other than a transformation of Dasima, the betrayed *nyai* into Dasima, the angry, defiant *nyai*—a transformation that involves her rescue from the white man's world and her return to the indigenous Indonesian sea of humanity. And this literary transformation marks the actual historical process of the half century from the birth of Indonesian nationalism to the realization of national independence.

### Conclusion

What I have tried to do in the preceding pages is to show how one work of popular literature, *Nyai Dasima*, has continued to be a cultural force during the past one hundred years of Indonesian history. The story has survived in a highly competitive cultural market in the form of a novel, a stage play, and a movie, as well as in the world of popular music. This extraordinarily long run can only be attributed to the bewitching power of the story itself, which has continued to hold generations of Indonesian readers and audiences.

While *Nyai Dasima* may be the classic case, it is by no means the exception, for a great deal of the popular literature first written in the nineteenth century gained an enormous following and thereby created its own tradition.<sup>5)</sup> Moreover, what I have tried to show here is that the tradition is not only literary in nature, but also contains important elements present in the cultural and social history of Indonesia, thus

5) For further discussion on this point see Oshikawa [1986b].

making the genre a fertile source from which those in the field of area studies can truly benefit.

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