

THE VOICE OF THE SUBALTERN'S SUBALTERN
THE *TIONGHUA PERANAKAN* WOMEN WRITERS (1908-1942)

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Introduction

In her article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak 1996), Gayatri Spivak argues that the subaltern’s voice cannot be heard and will not be heard because of the all consuming power of a hegemony and the “nostalgia for lost origins” (1996: 204) which necessarily envelopes the subaltern. Ironically, her doubts in retrieving subaltern history follows her initial calls for *Subaltern Studies* to include the female subaltern. According to her:

Questions of the mechanics of this instrumentality are seldom raised by our group [the *Subaltern Studies* group]. ‘Femininity’ is as important a discursive field for the predominantly male insurgents as ‘religion’. (Spivak 1988: 26)

Spivak’s calls for the inclusion of the female voice in the historiography of subalterns is especially valid in the case of the *Tionghua peranakan* Indonesian woman.

As migrant Chinese whose ancestors arrived on the shores of Java as early as the 13th century, the *Tionghua peranakan* may have assimilated with the local culture and people more so than the other Chinese migrants in other parts of Southeast Asia. However, even through marriages and naturalisation, the *Tionghua peranakans* still suffer from the effects of a diasporic milieu. Unaccepted by the *totok* who are the unassimilated Chinese, the *Tionghua peranakan* were also marginalised by the Dutch colonials and the *pribumi* (sons of the soil). Their sojourn into the journalistic realm in the early 19th century marked the beginnings of their identity negotiations to resolve their identity crisis. It was between the

period of 1908 and 1942, just before World War Two that their writings, especially the novels by male writers exhibited a tendency toward paranoid parochialism. Their emphasis on the need to protect their women folk from the forces of westernisation led to the belief that the romance novellas were the political plateau of certain factions of political dissensions among the *Tionghua peranakan* of that period. However, the remarkable difference between the themes of the *Tionghua peranakan* writers along gender line suggests a gender struggle.

Objective

This article uncovers the real value of these romance novellas written between 1908 and 1942 from the perspective of the *Tionghua peranakan* woman subaltern. The patriarchal and the feminist agenda is highlighted in the discourse that will lead to the conclusion that the voices of the *Tionghua peranakan* women can be retrieved through the essences of their novels. The novels reflect the *Tionghua peranakan* woman's voice and body. Against a largely patriarchal society the *Tionghua peranakan* woman resisted the stereotypes of patriarchy, an unmasked patriarchy, and created a space in which a new and modern *Tionghua peranakan* woman emerges. Through the act of writing, these women found their own gendered voices which were able to interrogate and erase the untruths that had trapped them thus far in a domestic sphere.

Historical Setting

Although the Chinese favoured their sons over their daughters, they were interested in educating the daughters in the Chinese mainstream or as followers of the European high-born ladies. Salmon Claudine highlights their activities in her book entitled *Sastra Peranakan dalam Bahasa Melayu*. She says:

Menarik untuk diperhatikan bahwa beberapa pengarang adalah wanita. Empat sajak dibubuhi nama samaran seperti Si Nonah Boto, Nona Boedjang atau nama-nama seperti TanTjeng Nio dan K.P. Nio, Kwee Tek Hoay mengemukakan bahwa wanita-wanita Cina tertarik kepada syair dan pantun, dan bahwa "banyak wanita dapat menggubahnya sendiri setelah mendengarkan penyanyi keliling dan 'wajang tjokek' yang main di keramaian-keramaian umum (1984: 30).

It is interesting to note that a few writers were women. Four of the writers wrote under pseudonyms such as Si Nonah Boto, Nona Boedjang or names such as Tan Tjeng Nio, Kwee Tek Hoay who claim that Chinese women were attracted to *syair* and *pantuns* and a number of them could change the contents creatively after listening to the singers or the *wajang tjokek* performed in front of the public. (trans. by author)

The talents of the *Tionghua peranakan* women were not confined to the *syair*. From 1911 to 1923, Salmon Claudine observed that the female writers like Hanna Peng and Hoedjin Tjan Tjin Bouw (Salmon 1984: 55), also contributed to the translation of works from Chinese to “Low Malay” which testified to their command of the two languages. Their potential and interest in the field of journalism also led to the establishment of several magazines and newspapers one of which is the *Tiong Hoa Wi Sien Po* and *Soeara Persatoean Kaoem Prempoean Tionghoa Indonesia*. The latter was set up in 1906 and spearheaded by a *Tionghua peranakan* woman named, Lim Titie Nio. The paper had a column reserved only for contributions from women writers. Salmon Claudine found that the period in which the women writers were most prolific was in the period between 1924 to 1942. She records having found 19 women writers all from Java namely Tan Lam Nio, alias Dahlia, Miss Kin, Kwee Yat Nio (the daughter of Kwee Tek Hoay) and many more whose works could not be accounted for although they published frequently in newspapers like *Panorama* and *Liberty*. Under the encouragement of Hong Le Hoa, the women journalists formed their own women journalists organisation in 1928. (Salmon 1984: 87). These women wrote and published novels and short stories which Nio Joe Lan described as “Tjerita Tendens” (Nio 1962: 97).

“Tjerita Tendens” refers to romances that were written in low Malay with the objective to stop the apparent deterioration of a certain situation or condition. It is the intention of this paper to critically analyse the aforementioned novels that have a romantic plot with a special emphasis on relationships between *Tionghua peranakan* men and women in particular, before and within the boundaries of marriage. The novels are selected within a time frame of 34 years from between 1908 and 1942 where the incursion of female writers into the publishing community

was at its speak justead of referring to these novels as “Tjerita Tendens”, I have thus far referred to them as “romances” in this article.

It is claimed that these romance novellas were written with the objective to teach and prevent an erosion of certain moral ethics or what could be construed as “traditional morals” among the young *Tionghua peranakan*. Hermes, in his foreword to his novella entitled *Nona Jang Berparas Eilok*, claims that he was inspired and encouraged by his friends to write the book (*Nona Jang Berparas Eilok* 1920) because he hopes it would persuade mothers from allowing their daughters to marry men of a different descent, [*teroetama bangsa koelit poeti* (7)] in particular white European men. Needless to say the heroine of the novel is not only badly treated but abandoned in favour of another European woman by her European husband. She is then ‘rescued’ from her ordeal by a *Tionghua peranakan* man who eventually marries her, giving her the respect due to a married woman which the European did not. Chen Wen Zwan’s (*Baba Fantasi* 1939) portrayal of the nemesis of the hero as a “*Baba gila blanda*” (19), crooked, lazy and immoral Eng Seng along with Dahlia’s *Kasopanan Timor*; where the “other” woman is apparently a westernised *Tionghua peranakan*, leaves us in no doubt as to the anti-colonial objectives of these works.

Oppressive Patriarchy

However, the political agenda of the *Tionghua Peranakan* men hides another insidious personal agenda. This is where we see the presence of the subtle workings of an oppressive patriarchy which seems to strengthen Spivak’s initial doubts of a complete retrieval of a subaltern’s history. Ania Loomba’s provocative questions can and should be applied to the *Tionghua Peranakan* women’s writings:

...if we suggest that the colonial subjects can ‘speak’ and question colonial authority, are we romanticizing such resistant subjects and underplaying colonial violence? In what voices do the colonised speak - their own, or in accents borrowed from their masters? Is the project of recovering the ‘subaltern’ best served by locating her separateness from dominant culture, or by highlighting the extent to which she moulded even those processes and cultures which subjugated her?” (1998: 231)

For the *Tionghua peranakan* woman, the level of oppressiveness is felt in the realm of patriarchy. In a tragic romance touted by the male writer, Tio Ie Soei (*Nona Tjoe Joe Perjintaan Jang Membawa Tjilaka* 1922), as a story recorded straight from the mouth of Nona Tjoe-Joe, the “tragedy” of the female subaltern is played out simultaneously as the heroine receives what is deemed her “punishment” for her disobedience. Tjoe-Joe’s tragedy begins because she was not the boy-child that her father expected and continues with her refusal to accept the traditions of arranged marriages and culminates with her making off with her lover while pregnant with his child. Expectedly, the whole family dies tragically one after another. By writing off the characters, especially the female characters in a tragedy, the writer has conveniently cancelled and silenced the subaltern. The destruction of the character is tantamount to a warning against physical and spiritual devastation which the patriarchal society wants to inflict upon the *Tionghua peranakan* woman who dares to defy the dictates of their society. Tio Ie Soei’s writings are but one of hundreds of tragic novels disguised as reading material with an objective to improve the moral standings of the female *Tionghua peranakan*. Tio himself inserts a blurb at the back of his novella with these words:

Saja pertjaja, ada banjak toeladan jang baik dan berharga, apabila toean pembaca perhatikan, dari ini tjerita (Tio 1922).

I believe there are a lot of valuable lessons to be learnt from this story. (trans by author).

In an effort to uphold their systematic defense of the hegemonic rule, the patriarchy tries to convince the female counterparts that a woman who flouts the dictates of her traditions is a helpless entity that needs to be saved from her own desires. This moves the patriarchy into the feted position of a saviour and the *Tionghua peranakan* woman as a victimised subaltern, which accounts for the existence of more male than female writers in the early 20th century. A woman who works for a living is deemed as having lost her [*kahormatan diri sendiri* (40)] virginal self. These are the words that Keon San, the hero in Dahlia’s *Kasopanan Timor* used to explain his surprise at the heroine’s pursuit of a career in a European firm in this manner. If a *Tionghua peranakan* is marginalised by his *totok*

counterparts¹ than the *Tionghua peranakan* woman is a subaltern's subaltern. The advent of education and exposure to Western ideals and Eastern feminism² became a cause for concern as it went against the traditional beliefs of the *Tionghua peranakan* who inherited the male chauvinism of their Chinese ancestors. To ensure that the *Tionghua peranakan* women obeyed the chauvinistic dictates which included playing the passive and submissive wife or daughter, they lumped emancipation with the morally dissipated Western ideals.

Resistance, Retaliation and Interrogation

The *Tionghua peranakan* woman became a site of power politics. The female characters that emerged in the novels came in binaries that metaphorically represented the traditional *Tionghua peranakan* woman in the form of an obedient, loyal, faithful wife or daughter, against the foil of a woman who works, dresses in Western clothing and is free from the dictates of a husband or father. Generally, the sphere of the family will be disrupted by the lure of the "other" woman whose every action is linked to the influence of Western ideals in contrast to the quiet, suffering antithesis of the spirited nemesis. As Ania Loomba observes:

Thus iconic motherhood or wife-hood is also constructed by purging the ghosts of racial or class 'others' and in the effort to harness women to the nation, certain traditions are repressed and others invented anew.(1984:220)

These iconic metaphors of the *Tionghua peranakan* woman encouraged the readers to perceive of themselves as long-suffering entities that rely on male progeny to survive. Hiang San Djin's heroine (Nona Giok Ngo 1919) is the epitome of the helpless projection of the feminine self encouraged by the male writers. Giok Ngo is not only an orphan but has little control over her life after she is left to the care of a cruel aunt in lieu of the death of her uncle. After being sold to a prostitution den and saving her lover's life, she is rejected by her lover's family for her stained reputation and commits suicide to prevent her lover from making a choice. The reliance of the woman on her female relative whether it is her husband, lover, father or close relative is repeatedly underlined in other novels as well.

Little wonder that the majority of romance novellas were written by *Tionghua peranakan* men who wrote under female pseudonyms like Madonna and Aster. Nio Joe Lan attests to this fact in his book entitled *Sastera Indonesia-Tionghoa* (1962). Their colonisation of the minds of the *Tionghua Peranakan* women through the reading material strengthened their stand against the colonials. Their insurgency towards colonial rule was also characterised by their oppressiveness towards their women folk which became a prevention of colonial invasion in the sphere of their personal lives.

In the initial stage of between 1890-1900, the writings of the *Tionghua peranakan* women were limited to the genres that were for entertainment. It was important that the educated women did not overstep their boundaries and threaten the power of the men. These limitations were of course tied to the general perception of women as weak-minded creatures unsuited to pursue works that required skills that only superior creatures like the men possessed. Salmon describes the early writings of the *Tionghua Peranakan* women as writings that were valued for the entertainment it evoked. She is quick to note that they did not venture into the areas of translation before 1920s. (1984: 27)

Contrary to the expectations of the patriarchy, the *Tionghua Peranakan* women responded on their own terms by writing novels that sought to create their own vision of the *Tionghua peranakan* woman, forcing the patriarchy to acknowledge their subalternism. These novels were quick to differentiate the colonial influence from the patriarchal hegemony and corrosion of moral values. Salmon observes that:

Pada tahun 1897, Tan Tjeng Nio memperingatkan saudari-saudarinya tentang bahaya mengawini laki-laki yang hanya mengincar uang mereka; naskah itu populer sekali dan diterbitkan ulang paling sedikit enam kali (sair tiga sobat nona boedjang dieret oleh Baba Pranakan Tangerang). Kira-kira pada tahun 1906, K.P. Nio menerbitkan sebuah syair di Bogor yang bertujuan meningkatkan emansipasi wanita dan diberi judul : Boekoe sair boewat kemadjoean bangsa Tionghoa fihak prampoean. (1984: 34)

In 1897, Tan Tjeng Nio, reminded young women about the dangers of marrying men who only squander away their wealth; the novel was extremely popular and has been reprinted six times (The *sair* about three spinsters by Baba Pranakan Tangerang). In 1906, K. P. Nio published a *syair* in Bogor with the objective of strengthening the awareness of women's emancipation which was given the title: *The Book of Sair for the Improvement of the Tionghua Peranakan Women*. (trans by author)

Tan Lip Nio alias Dahlia's three novels are aptly suited to be a study of the changes in the *Tionghua peranakan* woman as the author herself appears to have undergone a change in the short expanse of her life time.

In Dahlia's first novel entitled *Kasapanan Timoer* (1912), she demonstrates a consciousness of the repression that has been disguised as damning Western influence. Her heroine, rejects the social stigma attached to a working woman by being an employee of a Dutch firm. The heroine is heard replying to criticisms of her independence in these words:

...Ach kaloe akoe djadi satoe anak lelaki, dengan pladjaran koe jang boleh dibilang tjokoep, tentu akoe biasa bikin iboe tida oesah rasaken itoe kasensarahan....Ini semoea gara-garanya bangsa kita jang anggep, kaloe satoe gadis brani melangkah roemah boeat di kantooran, tida berbeda djoga seperti djadi satoe boenga rajah didjalanan.

Ah! If I were a man, with my education which is can be considered adequate, I would definitely ensure my mother does not suffer anymore....These are all created by our society, if a young woman dares to step out of the house and into a company, she is not different from the hibiscus that grows by the street side. (trans. by author)

She goes on to launch her own feminist agenda with the help of Dahlia. The authorial intrusion is almost indistinguishable as if the heroine, Giok Ngo is Dahlia's mouth-piece.

Dismissing the belief that women who work are nothing but the play-things of men,

[Sabetoel-nja nonsen, kaloe semoea gadis-gadis jang bekerdja di kantoer dianggep tida lebih tjoema djadi permaeannja lelaki-lelaki bebodran.(9-10)

Its really nonsense, if all the young women who worked in companies were assumed to be the play-things of men.(trans.)]

she goes on to assert the fact that it all depends on the moral of the person

[Samoea sebetoelnja bergantoeng sama moraalnja sendiri, kaloe dasar memang moraalnja bedjat, kendati dipinggit toch tida oereng masih bisa djadi korbannja segala lelaki-lelaki mata krandjang.(9-10)

It all depends on their individual morals, if the individual's morals are fundamentally good, the woman would not fall prey to the advances of a womaniser].

Her assertion can be perceived as an insurgent's attempt to rehabilitate the cultural habitations inherent in her society. She is demanding that the shadowy figure of the *Tionghua peranakan* woman be seen as individuals with minds of their own not necessarily on equal grounds as her male counterparts. Previously, the *Tionghua peranakan* women were seen only in the domestic space of the home, but with the introduction of a new trope, that of a financially independent woman with a job, a whole new conceptual space is being introduced.

She argues further, in her foreword, that the changes wrought on womanhood is not only an effect of westernisation but rather modernisation. What Dahlia has done is to attempt to refocus the anti-colonial oppression which underlies the patriarchal domination of the *Tionghua peranakan* women, away from them, as the catalyst of change is not westernisation but modernisation. Not bothering to disguise her authorial intrusion, Dahlia pronounces Giok Ngo to be modern:

Ini Nona Tionghoa jang maski bagimana modern, dan publiek aggep terlaloe gila kababatan, toch liangsimnja masih sedar, masih hargaken kasopanan Timoer. (1912:64)

This young woman no matter how modern in outlook, and how the people view her as westernised, her heart is still aware, still values the Eastern rules of etiquette. (trans. by author)

With this stroke, Dahlia has revoked the facade which is the threat of moral erosion among the womenfolk with the adoption of Western ways and unearthed the truth of securing patriarchal domination among the *Tionghua peranakan* men.

Dahlia's second novel that was handed in for publication 30 days before her unfortunate death, entitled *Doerija Pernikahan*, questions another stronghold of tradition which is marriage. In order to ensure that arranged marriages between individuals who have never seen each other would continue to flourish to ensure that marriage would still be a tool for powerful economic and political alliances, the novels frequently ended in tragedies. Those written by male writers did not encourage marriages that were founded on love as they viewed it as a flimsy Western preoccupation that could not sustain a marriage. Dahlia retaliates by ending her romance novellas happily with the two lovers discovering a plot by another jealous female. Her characters Sioe Lan and Kok Tin also rise above the tradition of marrying in the same class. Sioe Lan's father was skeptical about giving his daughter to Kok Tin who is the son of a rich merchant, a setting which would have turned tragic in the hands of a male writer. Sioe Lan, the epitome of the *Tionghua peranakan* wife who suffers because of the jealousy of a blind husband intentionally aroused by another who likes him, is given a different treatment by Dahlia. Dahlia celebrates her quiet strength, perseverance and loyalty, refusing to treat her as the passive, submissive shadow, suffering in the quagmire of absentism and finally emerging to receive without question the repentant renegade husband. Another female writer, Chan Leang Nio, also attacks the patriarchal control over marriage in her novel entitled *Tamper Moekanja Sendiri* (1925,) where the heroine searches both Eastern and Western philosophy for the meaning of marriage which falls short of her own tragic experience.

Dahlia goes a step further by addressing the issue of the many faces of a woman. In conceptualising the *Tionghua Peranakan* woman, Dahlia hopes to make her human, through relational forces of this world. In her final novel, *Oh! Nasib*, Dahlia's treatment of Nancy, the foil to her virtuous heroine, indicates that the title

applies as much to her as it does to Sioe Nio, the stepmother who degenerates to a pitiful debt ridden gambler; Ing Nio, the betrayed heroine and Soendari, the independent nurse. In fact, the title appears to be a lamentation of the condition of the *Tionghua peranakan* women in general. Sioe Nio, the stepmother is symbolically a victim of the boredom that beset the housewives highlighting women's issues that have never left the domestic sphere before. Ing Nio the betrayed lover is not lost without a father or husband, as Soendari teaches her to rely on her own strengths. She eventually becomes a nurse and the subject of pity changes from Ing Nio to Nancy, who clung on to the traditional idea of dependence upon a man to make her whole. It is no coincidence that Nancy dies in the hands of her previous lover. It is Dahlia's intention to imply that women die and degenerate if they do not take their own lives into their own hands and leave it to the men who treat them as mere inanimate vessels.

The women writers also challenge the perception of the role of a "mother" in their sensitive depiction of mothers and surrogate mothers in their romances. In contrast to the materialistic, grasping and cruel stepmother which we find in novels written by men such as Hiang San Djin's *Nona Giok Ngo: Peroentoengan dari Satoe Gadis Piatoe*³ and *Nona Lo Lan Nio*⁴, Dahlia and Chan Leang Nio's portrayal of mother figures as gentle, loving and supportive to their daughters, step-daughters and orphans in their care attests to efforts in eradicating the established stereotyping of *Tionghua peranakan* women in society.

Conclusion

Spivak's doubts certainly had grounds in the Indonesian *Tionghua peranakan* setting. The retrieval of the voice of the subaltern is not only hampered by an absence in history but also by an overpowering patriarchy whose agenda was disguised in the name of cultural preservation. To uphold the traditions of Eastern ethics struck a deep cord in this diasporic *Tionghua peranakan* community still uncertain of their identity and loyalty. Even in this day and age, Chinese migrants are most reluctant to part with this aspect of their culture. It is believed that the Chinese ethics to be specific, is the essence that ensures their heritage of excellence in all their undertakings. (Wang Gung Wu 1998: 1-45). But the male infiltration

into the novel genre is perhaps the most telling evidence of a different hidden agenda in the *Tionghua peranakan* community where the women were equally talented and skilled in the written art.

The skill and talent united with the increasing exposure of the women to education provided an open door to the releasing of the *Tionghua peranakan* subaltern's voice. The women's eventual foray into the different genres especially the romance novella led to a series of interrogations of the patriarchal perspective. Both Dahlia and Chan Leang Nio challenged the patriarchy on their perceptions and questioned the validity of their parochialism which eventually led to the uncovering of the truth. In their interrogation they have uncovered a male superiority agenda which hopes to suppress a feminine threat to the *Tionghua peranakan* patriarchal society. With their works, they have found their voices amidst the multiple hierarchies of colonial subalternism, to fill in the gaps, lapses and ignorances in order to present the *Tionghua peranakan* woman who is not absent nor in the margins but in the centre of her narrative. Not only has the act of writing secured the *Tionghua peranakan* women with a voice but has also given a space in "his-[s]tory" where the feminine self can be negotiated again and again.

Footnotes

¹ In a caption of Chen Wen Zwan's *Baba Fantasi*, it is written, "*Di mana-mana tempat kaoem baba terdesek di satoe podjok oleh soedara-soedara kita totok, ini boekan sebab marika lebih pande dari golongan baba, hanja marika bersoemanget*".

² For instance, translated literature of legendary heroines like *Hua Mu Lan* which traces the heroic deeds of a woman warrior disguised as a man in ancient China.

³ Written in 1919, the story revolves around the fate of an orphaned girl in the hands of a cruel female relative.

⁴ Written in 1920, the plot revolves around the wicked deeds of a step-mother who intends for her own son to inherit the family wealth instead of the first-born her dead husband.

Romance Novellas

Chan Leang Nio 1925. *Tamper Moekanja Sendiri*. Maandblad Hoakiao: Sourabaya.

Dahlia 1930. *OH ! Nasib*. Tan's Drukkery: Soerabaia.

Dahlia (Tan Lip Nio) 1932. *Doerija Pernikahan*. Kantoer Suiskerstraat: Soerabaia

Hermes 1908. *Nona jang Berparas Eilok / Perboetan jang terkoetoek*. Yo Seng Bouw: Pontjolstraat, Perkalongan

Hiang San Djin 1919. *Nona Giok Ngo : Peroentoengan Djelek dari Satoe Gadis Piatoe*.

Nona Fientje de Feniks 1915. *Njai Aisah*. Drukkerij tjiong Koen Bie: Katavia.

1920. Nona Lo Lan Nio / *Pembalasan Allah jang Adil*. Drukkerij Thetenghoeij & Co. - Buitenzorg.

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Tio Ie Soei (diceritakan oleh Nona Tjoe Joe) 1922. *Nona Tjoe Joe (Pertjintaan yang Membawa Tjilaka)*. Boek- en Handelsdrukkerij: Soerabaia.

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