

Pages from *Smiles in Indonesia*: What Is In That Certain Smile?

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Abstract

Around 1950s, most of the colonized countries escaped the tyrannical rule of their European masters. Assured with political autonomy, these nations continued to witness domination from the imperial centres along with the emergence of new global political powers (U.S.A) and their nominal representatives (from among the third world countries). Further, the changes neo-imperialism brought are invisible, wide spreading and intrinsically complex, as it targets to reinforce economic, political and ideological domination through numerous cultural negotiations. As a result, internal colonialism, global neo-imperialism, regional neo-imperialism and tourism are identified as its recent extensions. Literary productions from Southeast Asian region hitherto responded well to this makeshift phenomena. And this paper aims to classify and theorize selected pieces of one such book from Indonesia. Nearly four decades since the publication of *Smiles in Indonesia* on 1972 by O.G.Roeder, the veracity of the statement at the beginning chapter of his hilarious prose work remains impeccable and up-to-the-minute. It reads: 'Though East can meet West with a smile – the smile is different'. The book is a collection of 42 humorous pieces of cultural critique on the Indonesians' ways of living with aims of modernization as appropriated from the West.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Black Humour, South East Asian writing, Writing Back, Indonesian Writing in English.

Pages from *Smiles in Indonesia*: What Is In That Certain Smile?

The paper attempts a postcolonial reading of the book *Smiles in Indonesia* (1972) written by O.G.Roeder. The paper shows how the writer appropriates a Western form of writing, the way he rereads the texts of colonial and modern times and draws a deliberate attention to the profound and inescapable effects of colonization presented with that form. It has its central focus to provide a critical understanding of two of the prose pieces titled 'What is in that Certain Smile' and 'Wisdom of the East and Cockroaches'. However, the paper limits its analysis with

demonstrating the extent to which the book contradicts Western understanding of Indonesia in some literary respects and repulse them in its own way. It also attempts to capture the essence of Indonesian experience in its earliest encounter with neo-imperialistic variants. Moreover, the paper extends its understanding by tracing excerpts from the several literary productions of colonial times in its concurrent analysis of the text taken for study.

The book is a compilation of forty two humorous pieces of cultural critique on the Indonesians' ways of living with aims of modernization as appropriated from the West. This book sold out in a year time and got reprinted many times. In the last of this prose collection, 'Salute to Indonesia', he sums up what he thought as the function of this book. It is to give the reader some insight into the people of present day Indonesia. Although there are no details traced about the academic scholarship of the writer, it is inferred from the book that he is fully aware of the then socio-economic and political phenomena of the Indonesia in relation with the global change. And with the following excerpt this becomes evident.

There are the hordes of dead-serious men of progress who are invading the country under the banner of true progress or a certain kind of *doctrine neo-colonialism*. ('What is in that Certain Smile', 11)

O.G.Roeder presents the series with the literary style he appropriated from the English-born Canadian humourist Stephen Leacock. He borrows the understanding about humour, nurtures it and disseminates his improvisations throughout the book. Most of them are found in parallel with works by Stephen Leacock. Stephen Leacock, in one of his humorous prose pieces, *Have the English any Sense of Humour?*, points out that one can accuse a man of almost every deficiency other than the lack of sense of humour. A peculiar interest always attaches to humour. There is no quality of the human mind about which its possessor is more sensitive than the sense of humour. A man will freely confess that he has no ear for music, or no taste for fiction, or even no interest in religion. But everyone is yet to see the man who announces that he has no sense of humour. In fact, every man is apt to think himself possessed of an exceptional gift in this direction, and that even if his humour does not express itself in the power either to

make a joke or to laugh at one, it none the less consists in a peculiar insight or inner light superior to that of other people.

The same thing is true of nations. Each thinks its own humour of an entirely superior kind, and either refuses to admit, or admits reluctantly, the humourous quality of other peoples. (*My Discovery of England*, 78)

Through this the relation between humour and superiority can to be comprehended within the limits of postcolonial studies. On this understanding, the author celebrates the way in which his people overcome the miseries of life. He writes that the Indonesians prefer to smile at each other, not to laugh at each other. Whereas a text of postcolonial times did laugh at, to which the author responds to it smile of contempt. It is about Horst H Geerken who lived since the early twentieth century and has spent eighteen years in Indonesia and helped the young independent country in its development and construction on the sectors of telecommunications, electro-technical and solar power engineering.

Amusing and interesting events from his private and professional life during those years make made into a book *Der Ruf des Geckos* (translated as *A Gecko for luck: 18 years in Indonesia*). This text is critically acclaimed as ‘historically interesting and fantastically humourous for anyone who is interested in getting to know Indonesia for the first time. In this book he accounts the life of Walter Spies who arrived in Java in 1923 and settled in Bali In 1927. Walter Spies, an artist and painter, founded a group of painters and attracted a colony of native artists and civilization-weary European Bohemians. Within its narratives the following excerpt is taken that shows the way in which Indonesia is understood for the first time to the European audience.

Nevertheless there was a musty smell in our bathroom from the very beginning, which we assumed must be coming from the drain. We tried to disinfect it by pouring in a whole canister of disinfectant. But – horror of horrors – the whole bathroom came alive. Thousands of cockroaches came steaming out of the drain and crawled all over the

bathroom. It was like a horror film. We fled the apartment, and only came back later in the hope that our unwanted had stuffed off this mortal coil. The disinfectant had actually worked, and these disgusting creatures left us in peace for a while. (*A Gecko for luck: 18 years in Indonesia*, 46)

And also, there were some people who found something attractive about these brown insects: for example,

Walter Spies, who was enthusiastic about all the wonders of the tropic, wrote from Bali to his mother in Berlin that the attractive reddish brown insects reminded him of oversized cockchafers (*Ibid*, 46)

This extract found under the chapter ‘First Impressions and First Acquaintances’ in Horst H Geerken’s book. O.G. Roeder receives it and understands the predicament of new settlers in the archipelago. Apart from the abduction of the native land, the settlers, in their process making a narrative about the way of adjusting to local conditions, laugh at the environment of colony.

This narrative is actually found as a result of the settler’s fear of contamination by absorption into native life, customs and environment. Roeder further refers to the classic novel *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) by Graham Greene which introduced the game of *hunting cockroaches into high literature* (14). The novel is set in a colony in the West Coast of Africa during World War II. Wilson rooms with another colleague named Harris, who has created a sport for himself of killing the cockroaches that appear in the apartment each night. Many passages are filled with ‘the lust of hunt’ by Wilson during every night for cockroaches.

Though the geographical location is not of Indonesia, the place of action of Wilson is yet another non-Western domain. Combining similar moment of experience (here with the case of ‘hunting cockroaches’) in a different spatial-temporal marker along with once own experience at the native and responding to such a representation interests postcolonial writers. In this respect, Roeder’s humour is shown in the way he responds to these literary productions of colonial-modern times and mocks them in the following passage.

Hunting cockroaches, however, can be developed into a fine sport which may even be turned into a fascinating competition with an opponent. He who has the biggest bag after an amusing hour in the bathroom is entitled to have his whiskies, consumed during his contest, paid for. True sportsmen, it must be added, hold it unfair to stun the prey with splashes of water in order to partially immobilize them before administering the *coup de grace*. ('Wisdom of the East and Cockroaches', 14)

These lapses found in the European behavior in participating in native ceremonies, or on the adoption and even enjoyment of local customs on terms of food, reaction and entertainment. At the extreme level, to get over with the problem of Westerners in 'going native', the author answers to the complaints of western people who endlessly proclaim the superior life they enjoyed in their native country with the following advice.

Return immediately to the place where everything is better! You can stay without the Indonesians and they can live without you. ('Wisdom of the East and Cockroaches', 13)

Here the author becomes much more judgmental and says that *it's all a matter of attitude*. Colonial project in understanding the East (or the non-Western) had its *attitude* problem, found biased and necessitated responses from the native to (re)present their *point of view*. More interestingly, the title of this humorous piece is 'Wisdom of the East and Cockroaches'. This counters the European attitude or the worldview that aimed at ridiculing the various domains of knowledge of whatever is non-Western.

Tracing the roots by returning to indigenous practices and cultural forms are found so decisive to a postcolonial writer. This collection serves such a function. It illustrates how mythological characters like Semar, Gareng and Petruk from the epic Mahabharata enacts out witty humour at various occasions. Semar is the eldest son of Sang Hyang Tunggal, the supreme God of the world. Despite his grotesque appearance and bodily weakness, Semar is a wise adviser to Prince Arjuna and his gallant brothers. At the same time the mean-looking Semar, the fallen God, speaks for the people; he is the incarnation of people – equally so in today's

performances of the *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) plays. Semar's two sons, Gareng and the ever smiling Petruk, surpass their father in grotesque appearance and robust humour. Under the cloak of folly they are no means dimwitted. The dalang who masters the play with the leather cut *wayang* puppets or wooden *golek* figures, knows how to unite the sublime and the trivial. It is this insight into the principle of dualism that makes life understandable and bearable in the reality. Here, the writer traces the peculiar Indonesian philosophy of life which goes back to ancient times.

And the role of traditional art forms in presenting the Indonesian folktales of all ages also reveal much of the practical wisdom inborn in what is arrogantly or postcolonial-assertively called "the simple Javenes peasant". There is, for instance, the character of Si Kebayan. He is, on the surface, a good-for-nothing young fellow who always tries to evade working in the paddy fields in order to enjoy life, to listen to the song of birds, to caress his doves, to play and dance. But if things turn negative he overcomes them with astonishing cleverness.

Several pieces of the collection celebrate Indonesia consisting of hundreds of distinct native ethnic and linguistic groups. A shared identity has developed, defined by a national language, ethnic diversity, religious pluralism within a majority Muslim population, and a history of colonialism and rebellion against it. Indonesia's national motto, "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*" ("Unity in Diversity" *literally*, "many, yet one"), articulates the diversity that shapes the country. Syncretism and the desire for harmony have been the dominant factors in Indonesian culture for many centuries.

Around 1950s, most of the colonized countries escaped the tyrannical rule of their European masters. Assured with political autonomy, these nations continued to witness domination from the imperial centers along with the emergence of new global political powers (U.S.A) and their nominal representatives (from among the third world countries). Further, the changes neo-imperialism brought are invisible, wide spreading and intrinsically complex, as it targets to reinforce economic, political and ideological domination through numerous cultural negotiations. As a result, internal colonialism, global neo-imperialism, regional neo-imperialism

and tourism are identified as its recent extensions. Will the praiseworthy values of the East be destroyed by the proclaimed process of accelerated development and modernization? Literary productions from Southeast Asian region hitherto responded well to this makeshift phenomena. Indonesia, being a victim of (neo-) colonial experience, responded to this change rapidly. This collection is well informed with such a socio-political role. The book stresses that the integral human development involves far more than economic growth. Further, it necessitates *living with a smile* by criticizing the then mainstream way of life mimicking Western lifestyle. Besides manifesting the humourous intellectuals and politicians, this collection critiques ‘humourless, narrow-minded dogmatists’ found even among professors and leaders in Indonesia.

The compilation not only demarcates the East from the West but also serves a significant marker in enunciating the problems faced by the Indonesia in respect to global capital market economy. Despite its large population and densely populated regions, Indonesia has vast areas of wilderness that support the world's second highest level of biodiversity. The country has abundant natural resources, yet poverty remains widespread. Ecological imperialism that causes degradation and imbalance in the eco system against which the author responds at the earnest. Hence the role of humourous prose writers from the colonized non-western nations becomes imminent in ascertaining their work as a stark criticism not just with the society of their own but of the foreign.

Interestingly, the title of the book prefers the word ‘smile’ to ‘humour’. This demarcation acquires various manifestations and in the whole assorts a novel understanding about humour. Smiles are not always pleasant. They can be ironical, cunning and even cruel. Smiles may also be the ultimate answer to the miseries of life. Sometimes a smile is more to hide feeling or emotion than to reveal it. The mysterious smile of pretense emerges as strange and inscrutable. An Indonesian would hardly use a saying which is so helpful to westerners in the proper context: Smile at your shrewish neighbors because it makes them damned mad. In its encounter, it chooses contempt smile than to laugh at the colonial text. To conclude, nearly four decades since the publication of the book, the veracity of the statement at the beginning chapter of his hilarious

prose work remains impeccable and up-to-the-minute. It reads: ‘Though East can meet West with a smile – the smile is different’. And when it is with a postcolonial spurn, it has multiple agendas to perform. This smile of the postcolonial third-world subject is the entity which posits a unique and distinct spatial and cultural identity. Though the smile is appropriated from the west, the distinct native smile hilariously exhibited in this work serves as a necessary counter-discourse and response to the colonial laughter. At the same time, the hybrid nature of the colonial and postcolonial smiles, after their encounter with each other, is also manifested in this work.

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