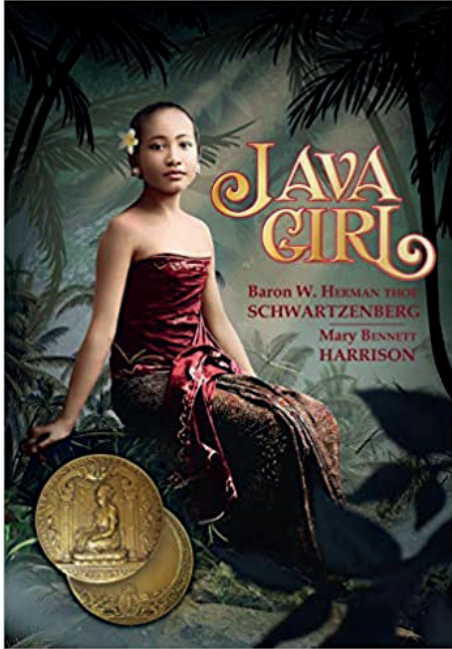


Java Girl by Baron W. Herman T. Schwartzberg and Mary Bennett Harrison. Snead Island, FL: DatASIA, Inc., 2020. ISBN-10: 1934431338; ISBN-13: 978-1934431337. US\$34.95.



The story is set in circa 1900. René van Landsberg, a young Dutchman, travels to Cirebon on Java's north coast to join Alfred, his older brother, who has worked on the island for several years. Alfred resents his isolation from working in the countryside and longs for contact with Europeans in the city. He unleashes his pent-up anger towards the natives, spitting the frustration he had been "secreting for years" (p. 64). Alfred sneers when René swears only to seek the company of "decent white women" (p. 21) and will not degrade himself by consorting with local beauties.

Men sailed to the Dutch East Indies to work in the colonial service or plantations, which afforded greater earning power compared to employment in the Netherlands. European women feared Asia's primitive conditions but occasionally followed their men to distant

lands, after overcoming concerns over isolation and the effects of a hot climate on young children. An assortment of domestic servants and affordable creature comforts offsets the scorching heat and dusty roads:

"In each colony one found this grimly amusing tableau vivant: the bourgeois gentleman speaking poetry against a backcloth of spacious mansions and gardens filled with mimosa and bougainvillea, and a large supporting cast of houseboys, grooms, gardeners, cooks, amahs, maids, washerwomen, and, above all, horses. Even those who did not manage to live in this style, such as young bachelors, nonetheless had the grandly equivocal status of a French nobleman on the eve of a jacquerie".¹

Javanese women are a dangerous cocktail of allure and exoticism juxtaposed against male weakness and the reality of wives and girlfriends left behind in Europe. Soon we are introduced to the *njai*, the *mia noi* ('minor wife' or mistress) of Thai culture. No task is too demeaning for the obedient, submissive, docile *njai*, provided it satisfies her white master.

European men falling for the exotic beauty of women in conquered Asian lands is a recurring theme of colonial literature. The British went 'native', while hapless

¹ Anderson 2006: 150-51. The name 'jacquerie' originates from the French popular insurrection of 1358, when peasants were referred to as 'Jacques', or 'Jacques Bonhomme'.

Frenchmen tried in vain to resist the temptations of a *congaï*, personified by Kâmlang in George Groslier's *Return to Clay*, also published by DatASIA. French empire-builders practised concubinage as a pleasant and easy way of "gallicising West Africa".² A temporary union with a well-chosen native woman was officially sanctioned and highly recommended as a necessary part of the French "colonial moral code", as desirable for the health and hygiene, prestige and discipline of French officials as it was for their "imperial authority and linguistic competence".³

By contrast, a warning, circulated to British Colonial Service recruits in January 1909, threatened disgrace and ruin for officials entering into "arrangements of concubinage with girls or women belonging to the native populations", to combat promiscuity and prostitution, but also to preserve the "imperial race".⁴

Predictably, the girl René left "back home" (p. 9) tires of an absentee boyfriend. Despite professing his disinterest in local women, René succumbs to the charms of Adinda, his own *njai*, thus creating the right conditions for self-fulfilling prophecies in colonial affairs of the heart. René follows in Alfred's footsteps, whose own *njai*, Missah, has been "a better companion for me than many a white girl might have been" (p. 20). Missah is "as dumb as a donkey" and teaching her is not "worth the trouble" (p. 72).

For Alfred, native women "don't know what love is", but he appreciates their "primitive mating instinct", difficult to find in the "civilized world" (p. 71). The white woman makes for a dutiful wife, to exhibit in polite circles, while the native woman is the "little cuddly animal that will keep you warm in the winter, fan you in the summer, bring you tea and liquors, rolls your cigarettes, prepares your pipes",⁵ to massage the white man's ego in Java's "infernal interior" (p. 130). White men can have their fun with native women in the colony, but "love must not enter into it" (p. 82). Eventually, white men return to Europe and cannot take their Javanese women with them because they would be deeply unhappy as social outcasts.

If association with a native woman is the inevitable course of action for single men, married administrators who brought their wives to Southeast Asia also indulged themselves with a local mistress, as practised by the father of Daisy Vermeer, the daughter of European settlers, who would one day rival Adinda for René's affections.

Native women are not "socially proper partners"⁶ and are found in colonial playgrounds from Burma (Myanmar) to Indonesia. The white man attends to his needs and the brown girl morphs into his mute, submissive and passive shadow. Although the plight of mixed-blood children is often discussed, the existence of illegitimate offspring is concealed from colonial circles and families in Europe. Some stereotypes are clearly for the benefit of little-travelled audiences a century ago. Meeting Missah, René is surprised that she is not "thick-lipped", nor is she "greasy or woolly-haired", her skin is "rich coffee with much cream" and she is none of the things he had imagined "a native

² Hyam 2010: 419.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hyam 2010: 419-420.

⁵ Williams and Sayers 2000: 97.

⁶ Kato 2003: 96.

girl would be” (p. 27). Not all stereotypes are works of fiction, however. René, a novice in Asian customs, is warned not to jump into the *mendi*, the stone bath from where cups of water are poured over the body while standing on the bathroom floor. I read a similar warning some twenty years ago, posted in the modest shower room of a homestay in Pulau Bintan, where I had stopped for a few nights en route to Java.

Dutch men in Java consumed dangerous amounts of alcohol and gambled at will, while their French counterparts in colonized Laos fell prey to opium, its consumption among civil servants banned in Vientiane starting in 1907.⁷ Straying white men could expect a jealous *njai* to seek recourse in the old law, the feared retribution served on Adolf van de Wal, René’s schoolmate in the Netherlands. After a night of heavy drinking with the boys, Van de Wal’s *njai* resorted to a poison ground from bamboo, which attaches itself to the stomach lining and remains undetected, causing a slow and excruciating death. Do newly arrived white men heed the warnings of old timers like Van de Wal, refraining from drinking and gambling, to become singularly devoted to their *njai*? Hardly.

Although the house servants respect Alfred out of fear, when René is left alone at home, the houseboys play games and do not fulfil their duties: his clothes are in terrible shape and not laid out on the bed, the food is inedible, his socks have not been mended and the house is distinctly untidy. Did the male servants entrap René, by creating the right conditions for the local *dea ex machina* in the form of the appearance of the beautiful, high-born Adinda, who would one day wear the *njai*’s uniform of white linen jacket and batik sarong? Pervasive though the concept is in 19th century Javanese urban settings, to be a *njai* was not every girl’s aspiration, as exemplified by Poniem, a divorced Javanese heroine, who feels better off living with someone of her own race rather than becoming a *njai*, “the mistress of a European master”.⁸

A local man, Sonario, has made a marriage proposal to Adinda, promising a dowry of batik sarongs, gold and silver ornaments. René encourages Adinda to marry Sonario because, as a European, he could never be happy away from his white people, just like Adinda would be miserable away from her (brown?) people. But Adinda has set her alpha female’s eyes on René and pursues him by indulging his every whim. The couple dynamics follow a pattern encountered often in colonial literature. White men do not normally debase themselves by cohabiting with native women, whose “social dignity” (p. 70) is enhanced as a result. However, a white woman’s standing in her community is diminished if she associates with a local man, whose own prestige suffers in the process. To local eyes, there is shame in dancing, but not in being a white man’s *njai*. Indeed, Alfred warns René that the natives will look down on him if he should dance in public with a local girl. White women have disgraced themselves in the eyes of the locals by dancing at local events.

White men do not emerge unscathed from relationships with native women. Daisy Vermeer, blessed with a diaphanous complexion, is Ulysses’ siren, posted by the colonial gods to test René’s affections for his *njai*. Fearing a dangerous ménage à trois brewing

⁷ Askew et al. 2010: 90.

⁸ Kato 2003: 122.

ahead, Alfred tells René that Daisy's complexion is no whiter than many other girls' back home: it is just that René is used to brown girls. René fears that he can never marry Daisy because his white purity has been tainted by association with Adinda.

Prejudice abounds towards the natives, who still walk in single file even though roads have been widened, because "natives do not readily change their customs" (p. 61), recalling George Coédès (1886-1969), the French epigraphist, for whom "even in prehistoric times the autochthonous peoples of Indochina seem to have been lacking in creative genius and showed little aptitude for making progress without stimulus from outside".⁹ Readers will be infuriated by depictions of colonial arrogance and lack of empathy. When a raging storm wreaks havoc and causes extensive damage, as well as the death of buffaloes and chickens, there is no display of compassion for the considerable loss suffered by the natives, just as there is no sympathy on display when the buggy of Alfred and René crashes, killing the driver. Alfred's emotional baggage is not wired to feel pity for the local driver, who may have been the only means of support for an extended family. Instead, he promptly arranges for a replacement driver and soon sits down to a hearty breakfast with the manager of a sugar factory.

The book is in the genre of cross-racial novels, set to challenge or corroborate a myriad of colonial stereotypes. The dramatic conclusion to this love triangle in the heat and dust of beautiful Java is revealed close to the end. The reader will be kept on tenterhooks, but the reward is an entertaining and eminently readable book.

Java Girl is enriched by useful notes and research undertaken by Kent Davis, the editor. These additional sections span from biographical notes about the authors, to essays on Javanese women in photos, Malay poisons and charms, glossaries and maps. On discovering the extensive photo archives at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, Davis added nearly 300 period photos to give readers an idea of what the people, places and things mentioned in the novel looked like at that time.

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⁹ Coédès 1966: 13.