

KRAKATAU ON FIRE THE DISASTER OF 1883 IN DUTCH COLONIAL LITERATURE: A POSTCOLONIAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

In 1883, the volcano Krakatau erupted and collapsed, causing the deaths of tens of thousands. The eruption was one of the first disasters to take place beyond the Dutch boundaries that received so much attention in the Netherlands. Although the disaster appealed to the imagination, it barely led to the publication of fiction. Only in Dutch Indies youth literature can one find something about the Krakatau. In this article, four Dutch stories and novels are analysed: “Stories of the moon” by Nellie van Kol-Porreij, *The hermit of Rakata or Krakatau on fire* by Robert Michael Ballantyne, “Nine Months on Krakatau” by B.L. Kailola and *Escaped from the jaws of death: The Krakatau tragedy* by Rick Blekkink. These sources are analysed from a postcolonial perspective focusing on unequal power relations. Focal points are the representation of the Indies and the indigenous people of the colony. This article illustrates the continuities and shifts in the representations over the course of time (1886-2014).

KEYWORDS

Krakatau disaster; 1883; Dutch East Indies, Dutch colonial literature, postcolonial approach.

ABSTRAK

Pada 1883, Gunung Krakatau meletus dan runtuh sehingga menelan korban berpuluh ribu jiwa. Letusan itu merupakan salah satu bencana pertama yang terjadi di luar wilayah Belanda dan menarik begitu banyak perhatian dari Kerajaan Belanda. Walaupun bencana itu membangkitkan imajinasi, hampir tidak ada fiksi yang ditulis tentang peristiwa tersebut. Hanya dalam kesusastran remaja Indo-Belanda dapat ditemukan karya mengenai Krakatau. Artikel ini akan menganalisis empat cerita Belanda dan novel: “Stories of the moon” oleh Nellie van Kol-Porreij, *The hermit of Rakata or Krakatau on fire* oleh Robert Michael Ballantyne, “Nine Months on Krakatau” oleh B.L. Kailola, dan *Escaped from the jaws of death: The Krakatau tragedy* oleh Rick Blekkink. Penelitian dilakukan dengan memakai pendekatan poskolonial dan berfokus pada ketimpangan relasi kuasa. Pusat perhatian dari penelitian ini adalah orang Belanda, penduduk Hindia Belanda, dan pribumi. Artikel ini menggambarkan kesinambungan dan pergeseran dalam representasi seiring dengan berjalannya waktu (1886–2014).

KATA KUNCI

Bencana Krakatau; 1883; Hindia Belanda; sastra kolonial Belanda; pendekatan poskolonial.

1. INTRODUCTION

“The isle of fire rage”. These were the words with which the famous Dutch writer Louis Couperus (1863–1923) characterized the Krakatau. This Indonesian volcano-island was so (in)famous that Couperus wanted to see it with his own eyes when he visited Java. He described his impressions in his 1923 travel book *Oostwaarts (Eastward)* (Couperus 1992, 123). A few years later, the young Hella S. Haasse (1918–2011), who was born in Batavia in 1918 and would become a famous Dutch novelist, made a field trip to the notorious spot with her school class. In her autobiographical book *Zelfportret als legkaart (Self-portrait as a Jigsaw Puzzle, 1954)*, she noted that they went out early, before sunrise, “in the colourless wagons of a train that was hired for the journey through Bantam, during which we paid more attention to our own choral singing to banjo music – *Oh Mono!* and *Stormy Weather* – and to the abundantly distributed bottles of spray water, than to the landscape in the yellow-pink glow of the dawn.” On an old passenger ship of the Royal Packet Navigation Company they left, “in the shade of the sails that were stretched against the glow of the sun, whilst enjoying the playing, the singing, the pea soup,” on their way to the destination of the tour, the Krakatau, that “rose impressively from the sea in the glow of midday: the naked, in black debris covered cone of the volcano –; when would the next eruption occur?” (Haasse 1954, 120–121)

On Monday, August 27, 1883, the Krakatau in Sunda Strait had erupted. During the preceding months, the volcano had already been rumbling dangerously. But on August 27th, at ten o'clock in the morning, such a severe eruption took place that the volcano almost blew itself up entirely. Reportedly, the blast was about a thousand times more powerful than the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima. The disaster of 1883 is, along with the Tambora disaster that occurred 68 years earlier (1815), one of the most severe in human history (D'Arcy Wood 2014).

The volcano hurled large amounts of mud, pumice stone, and red-hot ashes into the air. However, the most lethal were the ten-meter high tsunamis caused by the collapse of the volcano that destroyed everything in their path. First, the sea withdrew, then the water flowed back inland at a speed of hundreds of kilometres per hour. Overall, 165 villages were ruined, 36.417 people were killed, and thousands were injured (Winchester 2005, 232). Because of the telegraph, the news soon spread around the world. In the Dutch East Indies press, the eruption, described in bloodcurdling eyewitness testimonies, was breaking news (Jaquet 1983, 1988).

The Krakatau eruption was one of the first disasters to take place beyond the Dutch boundaries that received so much attention in the Netherlands. The same had not happened when the Tambora erupted because at the time the Indies were still in the hands of the English (during the so-called English interim government, 1811–1816). Now that the Indies were a Dutch colony, a response of the motherland was rather logical. In the Netherlands, charity activities were organized to raise money for the victims. The most impressive activity was the Krakatau fancy fair that was organized on September 22, 1883, on the then still vacant site that we now call the Museum Square (*Museumplein*) in Amsterdam (Bosnak & Honings 2020; Honings 2020).



Figure 1. Picture of the eruption of the Krakatau, 27 August 1883. Collection Leiden University Library, KITLV 5888.

The disaster has received a lot of scholarly attention (Winchester 2003). Geologists, oceanologists, and volcanologists were fascinated and have written about what happened. Biologists, too, have been investigating the Krakatau. They have observed how flora and fauna have returned over time. Eyewitness accounts have also attracted great interest. Characteristic of the colonial context is the fact that Dutch authors predominantly wrote these texts. The same context explains that we only know the names of the European victims and survivors, whereas we are much less aware of how Indonesian people experienced the eruption.

Literary historians are fascinated by the Krakatau eruption as well. Recently, my colleague Judith Bosnak and I published an article about the literary processing of the Krakatau disaster in the Netherlands and Indonesia (Bosnak & Honings 2020). In the Netherlands, various charity publications appeared, such as the “international newspaper” *Krakatau*. The content of this publication can be called international for good reasons: there are contributions in French, German, Italian, Hungarian, Latin, Greek, Turkish, Swedish, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Arabic, Hebrew, Japanese, Chinese, Malay, and Javanese. However, all texts are written from a Western perspective. The most important contribution to this publication was written by the Dutch writer Multatuli – author of the novel *Max Havelaar* (1860) – who donated a text he had written earlier, “The banjir” (“The flood,” 1861).

Soon, another charity publication saw the light. *Holland-Krakatau* was the result of cooperation between writers, musicians, painters, and artists from all over The Netherlands. The painter Johannes Bosboom was the editor for visual arts, the writer Jan ten Brink for literature. Inspiration had been taken from France, where an edition called *Paris-Murcie* appeared in 1879, with the subtitle: *Journal publié au profit des victimes des inondations d’Espagne*, a newspaper published for the victims of the floods in Spain. In 1883, another international publication called *Paris-Ischia* appeared for the victims of an earthquake on the Italian island of Ischia the same year.

Holland-Krakatau forms a sample of the literature the Netherlands had to offer in 1883. Leafing through its pages, one comes across all the big names of the time, during a phase in which the “Eighties Movement,” an influential group of Dutch writers that rejected formalistic style and made a plea for individualistic, romantic poetry, had not yet come into vogue. *Holland-Krakatau* contains poetry by Dutch authors such as Nicolaas Beets, Truitje Bosboom-Toussaint, Bernard ter Haar, François HaverSchmidt, Conrad Busken Huet, Melati

van Java, J.J.L. ten Kate, Johannes Kneppelhout and Justus van Maurik. What is striking is the fact that the contributions entail only a few descriptions of the disaster itself, just as the drawings barely depict it (Cuijpers 2005). That is not surprising for the authors had not been on site themselves and only knew about it from what they read in the newspapers.

Religion hardly plays a role in the Dutch texts. The Krakatau eruption was never interpreted as a punishment or warning from God, which was common practice during or after earlier disasters in the nineteenth century. Indonesians, on the other hand, did give religious explanations for the disastrous events. As early as 1883, the *Soerabaijasch Handelsblad* (*Surabaya Newspaper*, 8 September 1883) noted that “a hostile attitude towards Europeans” had arisen. The “indigenous people” considered the disaster a punishment from Allah for the Aceh War (1873–1914). And *De Locomotief* (*The Locomotive*, 22 September 1883) noted: “Here, too, the intolerant Mahomedans think of a punishment from Heaven for waging war on Aceh, and some Arabians did not want to give anything for the needy.” Thus, the eruption gave impetus to radical Islam in the Indies (Winchester 2005, 307).

In the Netherlands, mainly calls for charity sprung up. In almost every text published as a reaction to the disaster, it was emphasized that everyone had a moral duty to help rebuild the beautiful “Insulinde,” to which the Dutch kingdom owed much of its prosperity. This reaction in the Netherlands anticipated the so-called “ethical policy” that the Dutch government would pursue from the 1900s onwards, which was aimed at doing something in return for the Indonesian population, for example, by investing in improvements of education, health care, and infrastructure.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION, CORPUS, AND METHODOLOGY

The Dutch charity publications mainly contained prose sketches and occasional poetry. Although the disaster appealed to the imagination of the Dutch public, it barely led to any fiction. One can safely call that surprising for the Dutch eyewitness accounts are full of bloodcurdling details. These are extensively described in Simon Winchester’s bestseller *Krakatoa: The Day the World Exploded* (2003) and the BBC film *Krakatoa: The Last Days* (2006) that is based on the book. Only in the colonial youth literature did the Krakatau disaster leave an impact. Apparently, such sensational stories were mainly considered suitable for young readers, especially boys.

This article focuses on Dutch Indies colonial literature. Four Dutch short stories and novels from the period 1886 to 2014 are analysed: “Stories of the moon” by Nellie van Kol-Porrei (1886), *the dutch translation of The hermit of Rakata or Krakatau on fire* (1897) by R.M. Ballantyne, “Nine Months on Krakatau” by B.L. Kailola (circa 1929) and *Escaped from the jaws of death: The Krakatau tragedy* (2014) by Rick Blekkink. These texts did not receive any scholarly attention so far.

There is no systematic way in which to find Krakatau literature. Dorothee Buur’s bibliography of youth books about the Dutch East Indies, published in 1992, mentions some of the books. Furthermore, a search has been conducted for books whose title contains the word “Krakatau.” This still proves to be an imaginative name. *Ontsnap lang Krakatau (Escaped along Krakatau*, 1959), for example, was the title given to the translation of the war novel *South by Java Head* (1958) by the Scottish author Alistair Maclean, which takes place right after the Japanese invasion in 1942. An Italian, Gianfranco Sherwood, published his *Sherlock Holmes e l’avventura dell’enigma da Krakatoa (Sherlock Holmes and the mysterious adventure of Krakatau)* in 2013 while the Belgian Jean-Marc Kring wrote a graphic novel about time travelers that get stuck in 1883: *Agence Quanta* (2014). The German author Peter Dubina published *Die letzten Tage der “Krakatau” (The last days of the “Krakatau”)* in 2015, about a post-apocalyptic world in which the survivors of an extra-terrestrial

attack on the submarine *Krakatau* try to survive. These kinds of works, which are not about the 1883 eruption, are not included in the corpus. Non-fictional booklets, such as R.W. van Bemmelen's *De Vulkanen op Java* (*The Volcanoes on Java* 1950), are excluded too.

The texts will be analysed from a postcolonial perspective, focusing on unequal power relations and “othering strategies”, which has never been done for this corpus before. This approach consists of critical discourse analysis. Focal points are the representation of the Indies and the indigenous people. In the wake of Edward Said, one of the founders of the field of postcolonial studies, who published his famous work *Orientalism* in 1978, Anglo-American scholars such as Elleke Boehmer and others have studied colonial literature as powerful representations that did not only reflect but also co-recreated reality. In postcolonial research, children's and youth literature are not often taken into account. However, just as novels for adults, works for children were also dominated by the colonial discourse that legitimized the Dutch presence in the Indies. In which way were the Indies and the indigenous people represented in the four selected texts, and what continuities and shifts can be found over the course of time? The following paragraphs will introduce, describe, and analyse the stories from the postcolonial perspective.

3. “STORIES OF THE MOON” (1886)

The first work in which the Krakatau disaster of 1883 occurs is a story called “Vertellingen van de maan” (“Stories of the moon”) from the collection *Sprookjes en vertellingen* (*Fairytales and stories*, 1886), which was published three years after the eruption. Its author was Nellie van Kol-Porreij (1851–1930). This Dutch feminist and author was born in 1851 and worked as a governess in the Dutch East Indies from 1877 to 1883. The focaliser and narrator in “Stories of the moon” is the moon. That was not an original choice. The Danish author Hans Christian Andersen had already used this idea earlier. His text was known in the Netherlands for, among other things, the “translation in verses” that poet J.J.L. ten Kate (1856) made of it. Nellie's story is divided into six stories, three of which take place in the Indies.

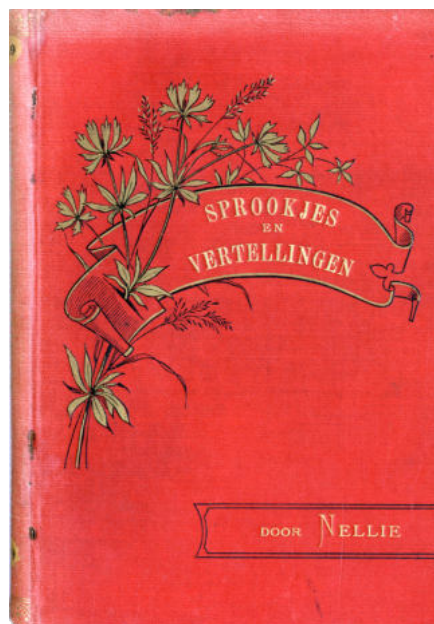


Figure 2. Book cover of Nellie, *Sprookjes en vertellingen* (1886). Collection Leiden University Library, 1059 H 9.

In the first of the three stories, the moon describes the Indonesian archipelago, the beautiful “Insulinde” (in the words of Multatuli): “I rose over Java’s fertile Westhoek, I lit up the beautiful Sunda Street with its ever-flourishing banks”. Only recently, Kol-Porrei writes, the moon had shone on the loveliest of scenes when the “old Krakatau” was still fast asleep in the middle of the sea and dreamed about how he made the sea tremble under his roar and how he had shattered ships with his breath, three hundred years ago. “Why had he grown old and weak?” Straightaway the mountain stretched its limbs, shook “his grey head,” and awoke (Nellie 1886, 218–218). Pale with fear, people looked at each other. Mothers grabbed their little children and pressed them to their chests:

The earth began to split, the houses collapsed, the terrified people fled this way and that, not knowing where to go; for everything threatened their lives: the sea, furiously overflowing its banks; the stone buildings, collapsing like houses of cards; the uprooted trees, the splitting soil. Again and again, the giant stretches himself out... and shattered lay the cities and villages; buried lay the people covered by the ruins of their houses; and the turbulent sea rushed deeply inland and took everything, everything (Nellie 1886, 219).

The description of the horrors stops abruptly, as a result of the focaliser’s perspective; because of the “black, thick columns of smoke, rising from the guts of the giant” the moon can no longer see anything and is no longer able to describe the devastation. Only every now and then, when the wind tears the dark, smoky clouds apart, the moonbeams reach “the Earth, the path of thousands of refugees: men, whose women; women, whose men; parents, whose children; children, whose parents were carried away by the devastating flood...” (Nellie 1886, 220).

In the second story, the moon rises “from Bali street and shines on the stony planes and the fertile mountain slopes of Banjoewangie and Bezoeki”. There, she sees the Indo wilderness, with the dangerous Bengal tiger, a herd of pigs, a monkey family relaxing in a tree. Then she shines down on a large residential house: “I drilled my beams through the dense foliage of the *waringin*, that shadows the entire backyard and peered into the spacious back gallery.” There, a group of cheerful girls is playing. Only Marie(tje), the blond resident’s daughter, is gloomy and does not want to play. She asks her friends whether they know about the Krakatau disaster. They have all heard about it. “It has spewed fire,” says Louise. “And has thrown houses over,” Mathilde states. Carry: “And has killed people.” Then Louise again: “And there has also been a big sea that has done a lot of harm.” Marie explains that there are many dead and victims, that many families have become homeless, and many children have neither food nor drink. She convinces all her friends to hand over a coin. The moon is very pleased with the behaviour of these exemplary girls: “Without anyone noticing, I pressed warm kisses on the swirling locks of these cheerful, generous children”(Nellie 1886, 220–223).

The third story is a mirrored version of the second. This time, the moon looks down at a poor family. We read about a mother and her son Max, who live in a simple cottage. Max is looking forward to his birthday tomorrow, to the ball he will get as a present, and to the cookies they will eat: “Colombijntjes with jelly and water chocolate!” His mother reminds him of the fact that there are poor children, too, who are hungry because of the Krakatau disaster: “Smoke and fire came out of a large mountain and everything that was near suffocated and burned. [...] Daddies of little children died, leaving the Mummies poor and abandoned; many Mummies died, too, leaving many children without parents, house, and food...” She convinces Max to send the money she had saved for buying the cookies to the poor children, “to buy rice and den[g]deng.” Max, who is crying out loud (“Max loves colombijntjes so much, Mum!”), ultimately gives his consent to the satisfaction of the moon (Nellie 1886, 223–228).

Now that the content has been summarized, it is time to analyse the text critically from a postcolonial perspective to shed light on the colonial ideology. In “Stories of the Moon”, the division between “us” (the Dutch) and “them” (the indigenous people) immediately catches the eye. This distinction is evident from the beginning of the first story: “The cities of the Europeans and the villages of the Javanese lay calmly amidst the lush greenery.’ Apart from a dichotomy, one can also find a difference in the hierarchy in this description. Explicit racial comments are absent from this story. Yet the moon is definitely a colonial entity. She shines, after all, on Dutch people only – who she, without exception, puts in a positive light; the white children in general and the Dutch resident’s daughter Marie in particular, are virtuous and exemplary. The same goes on for little Max, who sacrifices his birthday presents for the Krakatau’s victims. The Javanese, on the other hand, do not function as actors in this story at all. This is a phenomenon that the postcolonial scholar Elleke Boehmer (2005, 62) calls the “colonial drama”: “The worlds represented in colonialist fiction may seem strangely empty of indigenous characters. Although set in Borneo or Patagonia, the ventures and adventures of the colonizers, of white men, make up most of the important action. The available drama is *their* drama. Almost without exception there is no narrative interest without European involvement or intervention”. The naturalness with which indigenous people of the Dutch East Indies are left out of the story is a well-known strategy in colonial literature and typical of the colonial context of Van Kol-Porrejij’s work.

4. THE HERMIT OF RAKATA OR KRAKATAU ON FIRE (1897)

Eleven years later, another work about the disaster was published: *De kluizenaar van Rakata of Krakatau in vuur en vlam* (*The hermit of Rakata or Krakatau on fire* 1897). It was recommended as a perfect Saint Nicholas present for boys (*Het nieuws van den dag*, 29 November 1897). The book was a translation/adaptation of a novel by Scottish youth novelist Robert Michael Ballantyne (1825–1894): *Blown to Bits Or, the Lonely Man, or of Rakata: A Tale of the Malay Archipelago* (1894). He based his story on scientific information, including the 1888 report of the Royal Society of London (Morgan 2013). The novel is about the boy Nigel Roy, the son of a British sea captain called Van der Kemp. Eight years after its publication, a Dutch translation of the book was released whose content was slightly adapted for the Dutch reading public. The name of the main character was, for example, changed from “Nigel” to “Willem,” a well-known Dutch name. The story begins during a dark night in 1883 when the father and the son sail through the Sunda Strait. Their ship is damaged during a storm. They moor their boat at the Cocos Islands, where they meet Mr. Ross and his adopted daughter Kaatje. It turns out she was brought ashore years after her father’s ship had been attacked by pirates and sunk. The next day, Willem and his father continue their journey.

In Batavia, Willem gets permission from his father to make a trip through the archipelago. He meets Mozes, a young Indonesian, who invites him to join him on a trip to the island of Krakatau, where he lives with his master, the “hermit of Rakata”; he is named after the largest volcano on the island. The hermit’s name is Van Berkel and he lives in a comfortably furnished cave on the island. After a few days, the three of them leave for Borneo by canoe. On their journey, they have bloodcurdling adventures: they flee from aggressive “head hunters” (*Dajaks*), hunt for orang-utans, escape from the clutches of a tiger, and survive a murder attempt by the infamous Malaysian pirate Baderoon. Coincidentally, this was the same pirate that kidnapped Van Berkel’s daughter Winnie years ago; Van Berkel’s wife had already died by then. Having been captured, the pirate is lynched by an angry crowd.

At the end of their journey, the three traveling companions moor their boats again on the island of Krakatau. Although they hear a constant rumble and a thick layer of volcanic ash lies on the ground, they return to the cave. There, Van Berkel shows Willem a photo of his daughter. It is Kaatje! They leave the island in the

early morning of August 27 because it has become too dangerous, and set sail for the coast of Java. Then the fatal eruption occurs.

In that short pause, a blow could be heard all over the world, so booming and thunderous, that the three travellers stood completely speechless for a few minutes, completely terrified. It is no figurative exaggeration when I say that almost the whole world heard the blow. [...] The three men, who were so close to the volcano, looked around in bewilderment and saw, due to the ominous light that the volcano produced, that a large part of Krakatau had become detached and fell into the sea, while flames and bolts of lightning rose between the clouds of smoke and while fragments of the destroyed island were thrown in all directions (Ballantyne 1897, 159–160).

A few days earlier, Willem had written a letter to his father in which he revealed that Kaatje is Van Berkel's daughter. Thus, Captain Van der Kemp, with the girl on board, sails to the Krakatau, where they arrive in the morning of August 27th. Suddenly, a tidal wave throws an object onto their deck: "A canoe on board, Captain!" (Ballantyne 1897, 169). In this way, by happy coincidence, Van der Kemp is reunited with his son, and Kaatje with her father. This, however, is not the end of the story. A second tidal wave follows, which hurls the ship inland:

It went on, and suddenly they saw – thanks to the red glow of light, that the volcano spread – that they were no longer carried across the ocean, but across the flooded and completely destroyed city of Anjer. When the ship, finally completely damaged, had been carried into the land for more than a mile, it got stuck in a palm grove where it was stopped (Ballantyne 1897, 178).



Figure 3. The SS *Berouw* after the tsunami. Collection North Wind Picture Archives / Alamy Stock Photo, A8WHR2.

This event refers to the history of the warship SS *Berouw* (Figure 3), which lay in the port of Telukbetung and was carried inland for kilometres by tidal waves. After the disaster, it remained there for decades. Unlike the crew of this ship, everyone in Ballantyne's novel survives. Its ending is characteristic of the idealistic-realistic novels of those days. The narrator offers the reader a look at a scene which takes place on the Cocos Islands, a few years later. There, Willem lives with his wife Winnie and his daughter: 'a very small girl with brown eyes, dark hair and red cheeks – of course, in the eyes of her parents, she is the most angelic child

that ever existed (Ballantyne 1897, 187). Willem has been promoted and is, apart from the governor, the most important person on the island: he owns a large shipyard and fruit trades. They do not live alone in this paradise; her father lives there, too. A little bit further down the road, the old captain lives with his wife, who both idolize their granddaughter. And the Indonesian boy Mozes? He works as Willem's gardener and is still "as black as ebony" (Ballantyne 1897, 188–190).

What can we conclude when we analyse *The hermit of Rakata* from a postcolonial perspective? It is striking that this work also contains several strategies that characterize the colonial discourse of those days. A vivid example is the fact that the author represents the Indies as a paradise, where the most delicious fruit hangs for the taking. At the same time, it is described as a dangerous place, full of bloodthirsty tigers, aggressive monkeys, and pirates. The descriptions of Willem's exciting journey contain a "narrative of high adventure" (Boehmer 2005, 60) that is typical for a lot of colonial texts written from a Western perspective.



Figure 4. Willem, Van Berkel and Mozes are chased by "head hunters", image from Ballantyne, *De kluizenaar van Rakata. Krakatau in vuur en vlam* (1897). Collection University Library Leiden, 2856 F 27.

In addition, the large number of "othering strategies" – strategies in which the indigenous people are set apart as "other" from the European or Dutch – is remarkable. In comparison to Van Kol-Porreijs' work, in Ballantyne's novel, the indigenous people are not absent but represented as strange or less. Elleke Boehmer (2005, 75–76) has argued that the process of "othering" was a fundamental strategy in the process of colonization: "The colonized made up the subordinate term in relation to which European individuality was defined. Always with reference to the superiority of an expanding Europe, colonized peoples were represented as lesser: less human, less civilized, as child or savage, wild man, animal, or headless mass." This also becomes very clear in *The hermit of Rakata*.

The white superiority of the main character Willem and the hermit Van Berkel is presented as part of the natural order. Willem takes it for granted that indigenous people welcome the hermit and himself with respect wherever they show up and organize a festive banquet when they visit their village. The white man is constantly and systematically represented as a hero. Willem never shows his fear, not even during the eruption of the Krakatau. Van Berkel is a hero too: he saves everyone by "immediately and at once" killing a dangerous orang-utan with a spear, while Mozes only stands by without taking action. Further, the white

man, unlike the indigenous people, always acts calmly, rationally and justly, even in critical situations. This is evident, for example, when Van Berkel is confronted with his arch-enemy, the evil pirate Baderoon. When Baderoon attacks him, Van Berkel defends himself. But when the natives try to kill Baderoon, the righteous Van Berkel steps forward “to defend his enemy against the angry crowd” (Ballantyne 1897, 87; 110–111). Thus, civilisation is contrasted with primitive behaviour.

The process of “othering” is most evident in the binary opposition between white and black. White skin colour is associated with beauty, civilisation, intelligence, and leadership, while dark skin colour with ugliness, barbarity, stupidity, and docility. This is immediately clear in the beginning when Willem meets the native boy Mozes. The narrator tells us that Willem is attracted to this figure, “since the man was a Negro and therefore benefited from his appearance” with his frowny face and “thick lips”. The narrator contrasts this with the appearance of Van Berkel, who has a “clean, calm face,” polite manners, and a pleasant voice. When he addresses Willem, he does so using full sentences, in contrast to Mozes: “Last month mass [master] lost a servant has, also a nigger as I am’. Van Berkel is his natural master. The submissive Mozes has to do all kinds of tasks assigned for him all day long. At a certain moment, Willem notices that Van Berkel treats Mozes “not as a servant, but entirely as his equal” (Ballantyne 1897, 17–18; 23; 33; 36–37). That observation contradicts the representations in the story.

As is often the case in colonial literature, the narrator suggests that the black man is closer to the animal world than white people. In the words of Boehmer (2005, 80): “When it came to the classification of human beings, therefore, people from other cultures were ranked on the basis of their difference from Europeans, as degenerate or evolving types, filling the gaps between the human and the animal world.” In Ballantyne’s novel, it is implicitly suggested that Mozes is related to monkeys. Van Berkel does not only own a servant, but also a small monkey, Spinkie. Mozes and Spinkie get along surprisingly well. They share the same sense of humour and hygiene. When a monkey drops into the rice during their trip, Willem no longer wants to eat from it. This is no problem for Mozes: “It would not be less tasteful, even if there had been a monkey thrashing around in it” (Ballantyne 1897, 142).

5. “NINE MONTHS ON KRAKATAU” (circa 1929)

Thirty-two years after the publication of the Dutch adaptation of Ballantyne’s novel, another Krakatau-text came out. In 1928, *Stavast* was released: a magazine for boys of which only twelve issues were published. It contained exciting stories and essays full of interesting facts as well as pieces about chess, checkers, and a section with “Games and puzzles.” Because the publication process was stopped after one year, the stories were then, around 1929, all collected in *Een boek vol avontuur uit “Stavast”* (*A book full of adventure from “Stavast”*). One of the stories is “Negen maanden op Krakatau” (“Nine Months on Krakatau”) by B.L. Kailola, who was the *Posthouder* of Maumere on the island of Flores from 1898 to 1907. Menno van Meeteren Brouwer illustrated the book.

“Nine months on Krakatau” takes place more than thirty years after the volcanic eruption, during World War I. Kailola begins his story by describing the events of 1883, comparing the Krakatau disaster to that of Pompeii. Further, he tells the reader about a “Bantam saga” about the “male giant spirit” Rakata who lived on the island of Krakatau and “who only has to take one step to visit his female, no less gigantic other half who resides on Poeloe Soengian”. When he does so, it becomes a haunted place: “Then, the waves roar foamily against the island’s pumice rocks; then, the enormous snake that is part of his entourage devours every human being that ventures into his master’s realm, without warning...” (Kailola 1929, 211). For this reason, Indonesians dare not enter the island.



Figure 5. Ella and her family are brought to the island of Krakatau. Image by Menno van Meeteren Brouwer, from: *Een boek vol avontuur uit 'Stavast'* (circa 1929). Collection Leiden University Library, KITLV3 M 2010 A 1559.

After this introduction, attention is focused on a civil engineer called Handle, who at the end of 1917 developed the plan to settle on Krakatau to mine pumice stone. Together with his daughter Ella, his son Hans, his assistant Bernard, the indigenous maid Sarie and the house boy Sain, plus a handful of “coolies”, prepares the island’s colonisation. To do this, they bring everything with them that is needed to survive, varying from building materials to dogs, chickens, and ducks. In January 1918, they are taken to the island by ship. With the help of “coolies”, they build houses, work the land, and plant a vegetable garden. During their stay, they have all kinds of adventures, they risk starving to death and – despite all that – continue to believe in a happy ending. After nine months, they return to the civilized world. Their departure from Krakatau fills Ella with melancholy.

Like the two stories analyses above, B.L. Kailola’s work also shows strategies that characterize the colonial context. Just like in Ballantyne’s novel, the island of Krakatau is presented by the implied author in Kailola’s story as a beautiful, undiscovered paradise. The main character, Ella, is amazed by the otherworldly beauty and describes it in her diary as “die Vorahnung des Paradieses” (the foreshadowing of paradise). Where no one has previously succeeded, Ella and her family do succeed: the country is colonized with boundless energy. They conquer the savage nature and fight poisonous *clabangs* (centipedes) and snakes. The contradiction between “us” and “they” is, again, consistently worked out. The white man’s energy is contrasted with the passivity of the “coolies” that they brought with them to the island. They cannot get them moving: “The gang, naturally notoriously lazy, and possibly also tormented by homesickness, did all the work at a tiringly slow pace, in order to eventually, after a few days, stop working altogether.” Ella and her family, on the contrary, never sit still: “Quite the opposite: she used the spade like the best gardener” (Kailola 1929, 214). This is a comparable colonial othering strategy as found in Ballantyne’s novel.

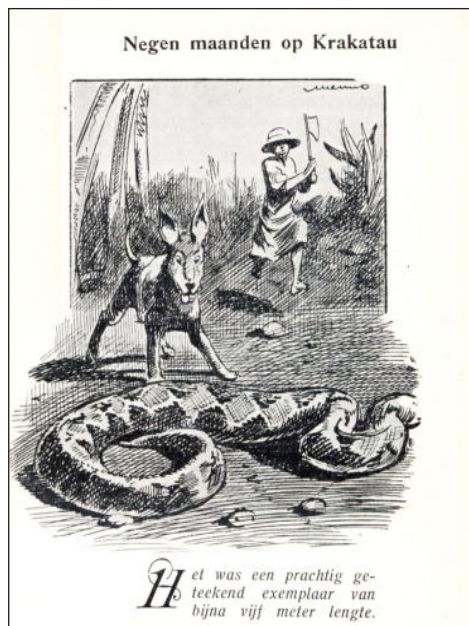


Figure 6. Ella on her way to kill a snake. Image by Menno van Meeteren Brouwer, from: *Een boek vol avontuur uit 'Stavast'* (circa 1929). Collection Leiden University Library, KITLV3 M 2010 A 1559.



Figure 7. Ella with a gun with Sara, the indigenous girl, behind her. Image by Menno van Meeteren Brouwer, from: *Een boek vol avontuur uit 'Stavast'* (circa 1929). Collection Leiden University Library, KITLV3 M 2010 A 1559

As usual, the indigenous characters in colonial literature do not play heroic roles. The “coolies” are systematically represented as antiheroes. They steal, refuse to work, and sabotage everything; they destroy crops on purpose, kill chickens, and even deliberately set fire to a field of kasos (a kind of grass). They will not help to fight the fire until Handl threatens to shoot them. Ella and her brother Hans, in contrast, are represented as heroes. Hans risks his own life when he goes out to ask help from a passing English ship. Ella single-handedly catches a turtle to make soup of it. One day, a large snake devours a chicken and nineteen chicks. The beast is so full that it can no longer move, but none of the servants dares to intervene: “So Ella

had to help herself, and with one axe she shattered the reptile's head" (see Figure 6). Ella shows another example of her heroism when one day native men armed with cleavers enter the island. The girl immediately approaches them with a revolver in her hand. The native maid Sarie follows her, but her courage does not match Ella's. She literally takes a disadvantaged position. "Even Sari didn't want to be unrepentant and placed herself behind her armed with a kitchen axe" (Kailola 1929, 215; 217–219) (see Figure 7).

6. ESCAPED FROM THE JAWS OF DEATH: THE KRAKATAU TRAGEDY (2014)

Finally, the "historical novel" *Ontsnapt uit de kaken van de dood: De Krakatau tragedie* (*Escaped from the jaws of death: The Krakatau tragedy*) by Rick Blekkink (1958) was published in 2014, 69 years after the Indonesian Independence. This is no typical youth novel but a bildungsroman that tells the reader from a first-person narrative retrospectively about the life of Andreas Braam, a boy from a peasant family in Gelderland, born in 1861. Blekkink describes how Andreas – thanks to his uncle Christian, "the Messiah of the adventure", who served in Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL) – falls under the spell of the Indies. His uncle describes the Indies as a paradise: "I can tell you that I have never visited a more beautiful, fertile and adventurous country than our Belt of Emerald". He praises the beauty of nature, the abundance of fruit, the overwhelming colours and scents, and the delicious cuisine. But he also talks about the heat, rain, and dangerous animals. Christiaan has fought in the Aceh War and talks about his experiences in vivid detail: "Behind every bamboo grove and behind sawah dikes, the so-called gili-gili, those cursed Atjenese could be waiting for you." He calls the Atjenese "predatory, immoral and feral people" and the war of the Dutch a "struggle of civilisation against barbarity" (Blekkink 2014, 59–62; 67; 71).



Figure 8. Book cover of *Ontsnapt uit de kaken van de dood* by Rick Blekkink (2014). Collection author.

Inspired by his uncle's stories, Andreas enlists with the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army, too. After having completed his education in Harderwijk in the Netherlands, he is sent to the Indies. In January 1883, the ship entered the port of Batavia. From then on, he can experience everything his uncle told him about. Shortly afterward, he is summoned to the palace of the governor general in Buitenzorg. He is invited to join an expedition to the island of Krakatau, where the volcano has been restless for several months. That is how

he ends up on board the ship *Gouverneur General Loudon* of the Dutch Steamship Company (Nederlands-Indische Stoomvaart Maatschappij)

They visited the island in May 1883. Researchers descend into the volcano's crater. Andreas is too busy with Anna, who he is in love with. This leads to passages such as: "Before I realized it, we were lying entangled on the ground and our tongues wrestled for dominion in each other's mouths in a delightful way. It was a great pleasure to taste Anna's lips, tongue and saliva and no matter how damaged Krakatau looked, I imagined myself in Paradise!" In the third part of the novel, "The Ruthlessness of Fate", Andreas and his friend Midas witness the Krakatau disaster on board the *Gouverneur General Loudon*. The history of the *Loudon* is based on fact. The ship was near the volcano at the time of the eruption and was hit by ash rains and tsunamis. Thanks to captain Johan Lindeman, who dared to sail against the tidal wave, the ship and crew were saved. Blekkink describes how the ship sails against the huge tsunami, and consequently assumes an almost upright position: "When we had reached the highest point of the wave, it seemed as if the *Loudon* remained horizontal for a while, then thundered down at breakneck speed! It was a nerve-racking event" (Blekkink 2014, 217; 243). Eventually, the ship ends up safe and they leave the wall of water behind. Three smaller tsunamis follow. Andreas escapes "from the jaws of death." After this, dozens of pages follow, giving descriptions of the despair and destruction of the Indies.

Escaped from the jaws of death: The Krakatau tragedy (2014) by Rick Blekkink is the only novel published in the post-colonial period. The result is that the book contains a totally different way of representation than the three texts from the colonial period. The twenty-first-century perspective is clear, for example, from the indignation in the description of the way in which the Dutch dealt with indigenous people in the colony: "It was definitely not an equal or friendly approach, but an approach that was blunt, rude and in every way domineering." In general, the Dutch do not seem to like the "gentle and helpful Javanese". Andreas, on the other hand, feels related to Multatuli – who, in the Indies, was seen as a "pariah, a snitch, a liar and an agitator" – and is annoyed by what he anachronistically calls "discrimination" (Blekkink 2014, 115; 166–168). Like Multatuli, Andreas shows a genuine interest in the indigenous people; he cares about the fate of the "coolies", writes indigenous survivors' testimonies of the disaster, and befriends two Javanese Muslims, Soetan and Rashidah, whom he, unlike the other colonials, treats as equals.

7. CONCLUSION

As far as we know, the Krakatau disaster of 1883 did not lead to the publication of any novels for adults in the Netherlands. Four works in which the disaster plays a role have been published for younger readers; these have been discussed in this article. Only Blekkink's novel is not really a book for youth, although the story is told from the perspective of a boy becoming a man. All four works are from different periods in de (post)colonial history: the first work was published in 1886, the last in 2014. What changes and continuities can be found in these publications?

A few things stand out. It is, for instance, clear that the eyewitness accounts of the disaster have been an important source of inspiration; the stories about the *SS Berouw* and the *Gouverneur General Loudon* return in the stories, just like the details about the burning hot ash rains and the devastating tidal waves. Further, the colonial context catches the eye. In the introduction of this article, it was noted that the eyewitness accounts of the disaster include a colonial perspective: they are written by Dutch people and are without exception written about Dutch people, too. Indonesians and their experiences are disregarded. We can see a similar principle at work in three of the four childhood stories, which, without exception, demonstrate the authors' Western, colonial ideology.

Precisely because these were stories for young readers, the colonial ideology is presented unembellished, in all directness. Simultaneously, some “hidden” strategies can be found when one reads the texts critically, focusing on unequal power relations. It then becomes obvious that European supremacy is, without exception, taken for granted. All three stories contain “othering strategies” and show a clear and systematically maintained distinction between the Dutch and the Indonesians, between white and black, between the civilized and the barbaric. In none of the three stories, does an indigenous character play a heroic role. At best, they are passive and lazy, sometimes even malicious. In Van Kol-Porreijs story, indigenous people are absent – a phenomenon that Elleke Boehmer has called the ‘colonial drama’. In the two other texts from the colonial period, the colonial drama is present: the adventures and drama are white and Western drama. There is, as Elle Boehmer (2005, 62) has argued, no narrative interest without European involvement or intervention. This also goes on for the first three text about the Krakatau disaster. Like other fiction from the colonial era, these texts were powerful representations that propagated colonial discourse and did not only reflect but also co-recreated reality.

The 2014 novel *Escaped from the Jaws of Death* by Rick Blekkink, published 131 years after the disaster, offers a different perspective, characteristic of the post-colonial period. The implied author and characters are aware of the unequal power relations characteristic of the colonial system. Although the book is written from a Western perspective with a white, Dutch main character, it pays – for the first time in the Krakatau literature – attention to the voice and perspective of and feels sympathy for the indigenous population of the Indies. The main character even befriends two Indonesian Muslims. That would have been unimaginable in the colonial context.

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