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Focalization and theme; Their interaction in Orang-Orang Bloomington


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FOCALIZATION AND THEME: 
THEIR INTERACTION IN ORANG-ORANG 
BLOOMINGTON

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1. Introduction

Orang-Orang Bloomington is a collection of short stories written by Budi Darma and published by Sinar Harapan in 1980. It represents our first confrontation with Budi Darma and his literary work. After reading the various stories of Orang-Orang Bloomington through, we were left with a strange, uneasy feeling, without really knowing what caused it or being able to judge these stories at their true value. After reading them again, however, we were able to discern more clearly the different links that bind the seven stories together, which in turn again helped us to discover why these stories had made us feel so uneasy on reading them the first time. We are of the opinion that for a large part this feeling was caused by the way the focalization and theme interact in the stories of Orang-Orang Bloomington. We would like to demonstrate this in the present article. After giving some background information on the author and his work in general, we will then concentrate on the subject of focalization and theme and try to indicate how much the two of them are intertwined in Orang-Orang Bloomington and in this way link the different stories together. Finally, we intend to turn to some comments made by Budi Darma himself and compare them with our findings.

2. The author and his work

Budi Darma, who was born in Rembang in 1937, studied Western literature in Yogyakarta and after that continued his studies at the University of Indiana at Bloomington. Both his study of Western literature and his stay in the West (especially Bloomington, in the United States) have influenced his literary work profoundly.

Budi Darma’s literary work consists for the greater part of short stories. Several of them have been published in magazines (Cerita, Roman, Horison, Lelaki and Buletin Dewan Kesenian Surabaya).

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Among these, *Kritikus Adinan* (published in 1974, republished in 1983) is the story most often referred to (Aveling 1974; Aveling 1983; Jedamski 1983; Teeuw 1979, II:183, 184). *Orang-Orang Bloomington* is the first collection of short stories by Budi Darma to have been published separately. As was noted above, this was in 1980. Apart from short stories, Budi Darma has also written poetry (published in issues of *Budaya, Indonesia, Basis* and *Budaja Djaja*) and recently (in 1983) he has published a novel as well – his first and so far only one, called *Olenka* (for a review of this book see Sapardi Djoko Damono 1984:30, 31).

Budi Darma’s literary work has been discussed more than once by critics. One whole issue of *Horison* (April 1974) was especially dedicated to him. In this issue Harry Aveling talks of the *dunia yang jungkir balik Budi Darma*, i.e. ‘Budi Darma’s upside-down world’, in reaction to an article by Budi Darma himself entitled ‘Sastra: Merupakan Dunia Jungkir-balik?’ (BD 1971:200, 01). Ever since, we are always coming across this image of an upside-down world in connection with this author (see, for instance, Korrie Layun Rampan 1982:299). What is meant by *jungkir-balik* is a world in which rather strange persons figure and events are presented without any logical cause.

Besides ‘strange’ (Korrie Layun Rampan 1982:302), Budi Darma’s earlier stories have been characterized as ‘surrealistic’ (Aveling 1974: 102; 1983:209) and ‘absurdist’ (Teeuw 1979, II:182). In contrast to his earlier stories, his later work, including the stories of *Orang-Orang Bloomington* and the novel *Olenka*, seems to adopt a more realistic tone, although both the said works still contain absurdist touches, as we shall see in the case of *Orang-Orang Bloomington* below.

Within the context of Indonesian literature Budi Darma is often mentioned in one breath with Iwan Simatupang, Danarto and Putu Wijaya (Aveling 1974:102, 1983: 209; Korrie Layun Rampan 1982: 297; Teeuw 1979, II:183). All of these authors can be described as innovators of Indonesian prose especially in view of the narrative techniques used by them and the unrealistic, bizarre, absurdist or even surrealistic atmospheres created by them.

It should further be mentioned that apart from writing short stories, poetry and a novel, Budi Darma is active in the field of literature as a scholar of literature. He regularly writes essays, a number of which have been collected and published in two books, *Solilokui* (1983) and *Sejumlah esei sastra* (1984). He has also written an essay preceding the seven short stories of *Orang-Orang Bloomington* (BD 1980:IX-XVIII) as a foreword to these stories. In it he sets out some of his ideas on literature in general and his own writings in particular, and comments on the stories in the book. Among other things he states that they were written spontaneously, *di luar kesadaran saya sendiri* (BD 1980: XII), as a result of the promptings of some inner force, and that they are realistic stories by comparison with the majority of his previous stories which are of an
absurdist nature. Besides, he gives an explanation of the themes and the genre, plot and characterization. We do not wish to go any further into this now; we would rather turn to the stories themselves first and interpret them as they present themselves to us.

3. Focalization

The title *Orang-Orang Bloomington* is explained by the fact that each of the seven stories focuses on a different inhabitant (or group of inhabitants) of Bloomington. The stories derive their names from these characters, in fact, viz. 1. *Laki-laki tua tanpa nama*; 2. *Joshua Karabish*; 3. *Keluarga M*; 4. *Orez*; 5. *Yorrick*; 6. *Ny. Elberhart*; 7. *Charles Lebourne*. These titles create the impression that the people concerned are the principal characters of the respective stories. In a way this is true: they are the persons who are focused on. But equally, if not more, important are the *I*s who bring these people into focus. For each of the seven stories is told by an *I* who thus functions both as narrator and as participant in the story. The relation between the focalizer (the *I*) and the persons focused on (the title-figures) is essential to the stories. It is around this relationship that the stories revolve.

The focus in this relationship hardly ever shifts. The people and events described are almost invariably viewed through the eyes of the *I* and this remains so throughout each story. This has quite a number of consequences. In the first place this one-way focalization is of importance for the way we are given information about the *I*s on the one hand and the title-figures on the other: whereas we do receive direct information about the title-figures, we do not receive such direct information about the *I*s. Information about the *I*s can only be gleaned indirectly from the way these *I*s describe events and react to the title-figures. In this connection it is significant that the title-figures have distinct names, which are even accentuated by their use as titles for the various stories, whereas the *I*s in most cases remain anonymous, except in the last story, where the *I* eventually becomes known to us by the name of James Russell (BD 1980:174). Because the stories are set in Bloomington and because the reader is confronted first of all with the mention of Budi Darma's stay in Bloomington on the cover of the book, one may be inclined to identify Budi Darma, the author, with the *I* who is the narrator. This, however, is just one of those automatic responses most readers are prone to (cf. Wellek & Warren 1956:222). In the text itself there is no evidence whatever to be found to support such an identification. The lack of information about the *I* is not only restricted to his name, but also concerns his age, his previous history, his social background and his daily occupation in so far as it has no connection with the title-figure. Only in the second story are we told that he is a *mahasiswa asing* (BD 1980:39); in the fourth story he is a married man (whereas in all the other stories he is single); and in the last story he is called James...
Russell. This proves in any case that the I’s of these stories are intended to be different persons. We are inclined to regard the I’s of the other stories as yet other personalities again. We must keep in mind that we are dealing with short stories, stories that are to be read separately from each other. The effect that this lack of information about the I had on us was that we were more concerned with the I and his often curious way of thinking and behaving, in fact, than with the title-figures who were supposed to be highlighted.

Another consequence of such a one-way focalization is that a highly subjective view is given of the characters and events described. They are only seen from the point of view of the I, who by his very nature as such is liable to be subjective. He colours the story according to his viewpoint and leaves out whatever he wants to. This subjectivity, too, can be exploited by the author as a means of manipulating the reader. For a reader has no choice but to accept the fictional reality as it is presented by the I, no matter how incredible it seems, even to the extent that he is effectively at the mercy of the I. However, the more the fictional reality differs from the reader’s own reality, the more the latter will have his doubts about the I’s reliability. Thus a tension can be created between the reality as presented and reality as imagined by us as readers. This tension is exploited to the full by Budi Darma and plays a most significant role in his *Orang-Orang Bloomington*. One can imagine people being unwilling to have contact with others, but a neighbourhood full of exclusively such people (as in *Laki-laki tua tanpa nama*) seems hard to believe in. A man behaving sadistically towards children could occur in reality, but the sadistic behaviour of the I in *Keluarga M* reaches the absurd when he goes so far as to have coca-cola machines installed in the hope that the Meek children will get wounded by the glass of the bottles. Thus again and again we come across people whose curious ways are accentuated, exaggerated and caricatured. The effect is that the reader is thrown into a state of confusion and doubt. Is the world described really as strange as he is led here to believe? Or does the I merely have a strange view of things? This tension between the reality as presented and reality as one can imagine it is accentuated by the contrast between the mode of working out characterization and plot on the one hand and the setting on the other. In contrast to the strange people and bizarre events of which one does not get a very clear idea, there is the orderly, easily recognizable world of houses, streets and trees that is described with the utmost exactitude. Whereas the setting seems real enough, one cannot decide about the authenticity of the characters and plots, which, of course, is not necessary, either, as one is dealing with fiction. Nevertheless, this does throw the reader into confusion.

4. The theme of alienation
As we have seen above, the one-way focalization with the I as focalizer
gives rise to a lot of confusion. It is precisely this confusion that rein-
forces the theme binding all the stories together and which in our opinion
can be defined as: a feeling of total alienation. This alienation becomes
manifest on three different levels, namely between man and his surroun-
dings, between man and his fellow-men and between man and his own
self.

The alienation between man and his surroundings, the first aspect of the
theme of these stories, is symbolized by the place of residence of the I
and many other characters, either in a loteng (attic) or in an apartment
on one of the top floors of some gedung raksasa (skyscraper), in either
case far removed from the earth. Perhaps we should place this feature
against the specific Indonesian background. Keeping in mind that this
book is obviously intended for an Indonesian reading public, it should
be realized that traditionally for most Indonesians the earth, as the
source of their daily food, is extremely important (cf. the tedak sitèn
ceremony in Java, Koentjaraningrat 1957:28 and Koperberg 1934:213-
14). A person living so far removed from Mother Earth in such a context
would be considered as being remote indeed from the essential things in
life.

In the first two stories this alienation from the person’s surroundings is
also expressed by the weather conditions. It is the musim gugur (au-
tumn) and the musim dingin (winter) that give rise to individual isola-
tion. This is made especially clear in the first story:

'Selama musim panas saya tidak mengalami kesulitan . . . Setelah
musim panas siap untuk digantikan oleh musim gugur, keadaan
saya berubah. . . . makin lama hari makin pendek – matahari
makin terlambat terbit dan makin cepat terbenam . . . Kesem-
patan untuk keluar makin tipis’ (BD 1980:2, 3).

Because of this the I is thrown back on Fess, the quiet street he is living
in, and the three widows who rebuff his attempts to establish contact
with them. This gives rise to frustration in him and subsequently fosters
an obsession about establishing contact with an old man who has come to
live in Fess. It is during the autumn season that the I endeavours to reach
the old man. Towards the climax of the story, when the I finally comes
into contact with this man, just before the latter’s death, the first snow-
flakes of the year are falling more and more thickly.

Apart from the fact that the cold season may generally be associated
with illness and death, for any Indonesian it is especially this musim
gugur and musim dingin that are strange and unfamiliar. It is striking that
in Orang-Orang Bloomington this motif of the weather as influencing
the I’s state of mind appears precisely in the two stories in which the I is
presented as a foreigner (in the second story explicitly, BD 1980:39; in
the first story only through the comment of Budi Darma, BD 1980:
XVI).
The alienation between man and his fellow-men, the second aspect of our theme, is most emphasized. It is present in all the stories. Motifs that recur again and again are those of old people living on their own, people isolating themselves, and the telephone and (even anonymous) letters as indirect and impersonal means of communication. This is clearly brought out already in the first story, *Laki-laki tua tanpa nama*.

The *I* in this story comes to live in a street in which there are only three houses; each of these houses is owned by a widow living there alone. The attics of two of the houses are let to the *I* and to the old man after whom the story is called. A street with only three widows living in separate houses creates a curious impression even on a western reader. It will seem even stranger to an Indonesian reader, who is used to strong family ties involving that old people live with their family. Moreover, these old ladies each live their own life, and do not seem to have any contact with each other or to want to have such contact:

‘Rupanya dengan jalan saling membiarkan inilah mereka menjaga hubungan baik’ (*BD* 1980:3).

When the *I* comes to live in the attic of Ny. MacMillan’s house, she gives him the advice:


Thereupon she cuts off every direct means of communication with the *I* as well. He is only to communicate with her by telephone; he is only allowed to use the side-door, whereas she herself only uses the front-door; and finally, he has to pay the rent by cheque, which he has to put in her letterbox:


At first these conditions do not bother the *I*. As was noted above, it is only later on, when the weather changes, that he becomes conscious of his isolation. This leads to his fixation on the old man who comes to live in an attic opposite his own. His curiosity is aroused when he sees the man often playing with a pistol. Instead of approaching the man himself, however, the *I* starts ringing his landlady and the two other old ladies. None of them seems very interested. The *I*’s next step is to try and get information from the telephone operator. This attempt also fails, however. Then the owner of the local shop, Marsh, is approached, but, although the old man is one of his customers, Marsh cannot say anything
about him. The I's last chance is to write a letter to this man, whose name he does not even know. On the envelope he writes a name he has made up himself: John Dunlap. However, this last attempt to establish contact with the old man also fails - he does not receive any reaction whatsoever. The I a few days later finds his letter lying soaking wet in the gutter. It is obvious that no contact can be effected in this way. After some time, when the same old man has become a well-known phenomenon in town because of his strange behaviour, letters to the editor expressing various opinions are published in the campus newspaper. The climax of the story is reached when the I is a witness to the old man's chasing Ny. Casper, one of the old ladies living in Fess, with his pistol. Two shots are heard and the next moment the I sees both the man and Ny. Casper lying on the ground. The old man is wounded, and then at last the I establishes contact with him, just before he dies; the old man seems to want to tell him something with his eyes, and the I caresses him. Then, quite unexpectedly, it turns out that it was not the old man, playing the fool and terrifying people with his pistol, who fired the shot, but Ny. Nolan, the third old lady.

Charles Lebourne, the last story, displays many similarities with the first story. The title-figure is also an old, unmarried man, and the I likewise makes several, often similar, attempts to communicate with him - by telephone, through the telephone operator or neighbours, by waiting for the man at the parking-lot, or by following him to the shop - which in this case finally result in a conversation. Once the first contact has been established, the I develops a rather strange attitude to him. He believes Charles Lebourne to be his father, who left him and his mother long ago, and tries to humiliate and annoy him in various, often very mean, ways. Nonetheless, when he moves house, he invites Charles Lebourne to come and live with him. In the end, however, it is the I who is humiliated by Charles Lebourne. Overcome with feelings of pity for the sick man, the I lifts his feet onto his shoulders to ease his pain. This passage is rather strange. Why doesn’t the I lift Charles Lebourne’s feet onto a chair or something else? Perhaps we should associate this act with that of the subjects of an Indonesian raja in olden times menjunjung kaki (menjunjung duli = to carry His Majesty’s feet on one’s head), which makes this an unmistakable sign of submissiveness. We see how the I’s relationship with Charles Lebourne is full of contradictions; neither of them seems capable of building up a ‘normal’ human relationship.

In Keluarga M as well as in Yorrick, the I is confronted with a group of persons who are on fairly intimate terms with each other. The alienated behaviour of the I thus is more accentuated in these stories, as it stands in glaring contrast to the mutual solidarity of the other characters.

In Keluarga M the I's loneliness is made clear in the very first sentence:
By the end of the story no change has been effected in this situation, for the last sentence contains a very similar statement to the first:

‘Dan saya tetap di sini, tetap sendiri’ (BD 1980:61).8

The loneliness of the I is contrasted to the solidarity of keluarga M. Although this family lacks happiness in a materialistic sense (they are orang melarat, BD 1980:51), they can be said to exemplify a happy, harmonious family: the two brothers, Mark and Martin, are always playing together, the elder brother always protecting and defending the younger one when necessary (BD 1980:44); the father, Melvin, trusts his sons completely and defends them when they are scolded by the I (BD 1980:45, 46); and the mother, Marion, agrees with everything her husband says (BD 1980:45, 46). The happiness of this family is most evident when the parents play outside with their children:


The sight of this happy family brings his own loneliness home to the I. He is filled with envy and spite towards keluarga M. This urges him on to certain excesses that can hardly be said to be realistic. But, although keluarga M becomes the victim of a traffic accident, as the I had hoped for, their happiness has not been destroyed, because they continue to live in harmony and love with each other:


In Yorrick, although the plot is quite different, we can see some similarities with Keluarga M. Again the I is an onlooker, who is incapable of establishing (close) contacts with others. As opposed to him there is Yorrick, his house-(loteng)-mate, who from the moment he appears steals the show. He becomes popular with everyone and soon is surrounded by numerous friends. Again from jealousy and powerlessness, the I behaves spitefully towards Yorrick. He not only spits and urinates on his clothes, but also spits on his food. None of his own attempts to become popular, especially with the girls of the group—Catherine and later on Caroline—, have any success. At a party where all are gathered, everyone joins in the fun except the I, who does not even understand half the jokes. He is brought face to face with the fact that people care little for him and that he is only an outsider:

‘Memang setiap orang menyambut saya dengan ramah, tapi saya
tahu, apakah saya datang atau tidak bagi mereka sama saja’ (BD 1980:111).

‘... saya berperan sebagai penonton’ (BD 1980:112).


The third aspect of the main theme, the alienation between man and his own self, becomes manifest in three different ways: 1. disgust with one’s own person; 2. the continual identification of oneself with others; 3. behaviour of which one is not really sure.

The disgust with one’s own person is clearly expressed in Joshua Karabish and Charles Lebourne. Both Joshua in Joshua Karabish and the I in Charles Lebourne loathe their own appearance, which is a reflection of their inner self. Joshua fears that people will not judge his poems at their intrinsic value because:

‘... rupa saya buruk [menjijikkan, as he says later on] dan memang dasar kepribadian saya tidak menarik’ (BD 1980:26).

The I in Charles Lebourne is convinced of his own imperfection and of the inevitability of suffering because of this shortcoming:

‘... bahwa saya tidak sempurna dan bahwa saya harus menderita karena kekurangan ini’ (BD 1980:157).

The windows of his flat reflect his face every time he looks outside. Each time he sees his face reflected he is reminded of his inadequacies, and this troubles him:

‘Yang merisaukan saya adalah setiap kali saya melihat wajah saya, saya merasakan bahwa semua yang saya kerjakan tidak pernah selesai, seolah saya ditakdirkan untuk selalu sibuk, tapi tidak mempunyai arah’ (BD 1980:155).

What is the use of life if man only exerts himself for nothing? The feeling of alienation from one’s own self is caused by a sense of one’s incompetence and insignificance. In Charles Lebourne the I’s insignificance is opposed to the magnitude and solidity of Tulip Tree, a 50-storey skyscraper which dwarfs all human beings. In the text itself this huge building is, in fact, compared to a raksasa (giant) of whom the I stands in awe:


The last sentence brings out the contrast even further: in opposition to the (relative) imperishability of things stands the transience of man. What really is the use of man’s existence if he only lives to die and be forgotten after his death? As Ny. Elberhart says in the story of the same name:
Although this is the usual way of things, man can strive to make his name outlive him. One means of attaining this object is the writing of poetry. This motif of writing poetry as a road to immortality stands out clearly in *Joshua Karabish* and *Ny. Elberhart*. In both stories the title-figures die after a period of serious illness, and in both the *I*, who has identified himself with each title-figure, wants to make the name of these persons live on after their death. Thus in *Joshua Karabish* the *I* sends some of Joshua’s poems to an association offering prizes for the best poems submitted, doing so under his own name, which makes the identification complete. In *Ny. Elberhart* this happens the other way round: the *I* writes a poem and publishes it under the name of Ny. Elberhart in a magazine called *Primo*.

In *Ny. Elberhart* the notion that poetry may be regarded as a means of becoming immortal is treated ironically. The idea that poetry can be written by anyone at any time is put forward several times. This is what the *I* also feels:


The poems presented in his story seem very stereotyped, even *pantun*-like (BD 1980:141), however, although they have supposedly been written by Americans. One poem (BD 1980:150) even reminded us of Sutardji’s work. Moreover, poets are described in a highly caricatured way:

‘agak kotor, gondrong, rupanya jarang mandi dan jarang menggosok gigi’ (BD 1980:147).

It is striking that poetry-reading takes places *di bawah tanah* (underground) (BD 1980:147). Should we look for a special meaning behind this? Is it supposed to mean that (most) poetry cannot stand up to daylight scrutiny? In any case, as regards its being a means towards immortality, it makes little difference whether the name of Ny. Elberhart appears in a death notice or in a magazine under a poem. People take no more notice of a poem than of a death notice:


The magazine *Primo* serves no useful purpose; it is only good for throwing into the rubbish-bin or providing shelter against the rain.

The identification of oneself with others can lead to such an absorption in these others that one becomes alienated from oneself in this way as well. This is the case in *Laki-laki tua tanpa nama, Joshua Karabish, Ny. Elberhart* and *Charles Lebourne*. In these stories the *I* is in a process of identifying himself with the title-figure, although with rather mixed feelings. That this is not beneficial to the *I* is symbolized by the *I*'s feeling physically ill. Whether he really is sick or is psychologically influenced by the person he identifies with does not always become clear. For instance, in *Joshua Karabish* the *I* seems to display exactly the same symptoms as Joshua, but each doctor he consults assures him that his physical condition is quite normal. One is nearly led to believe that the *I* actually wants to hear he is suffering from the same illness as Joshua:

‘Pada suatu malam saya terbangun karena tenggorokan saya panas bagaikan dibakar, hidung saya sakit seperti dimasuki lintah, dan telinga saya mendenging dan terasa bengkak bagian dalamnya’ (BD 1980:30).


It should be noted that the identification of the *I* with someone else is not directed towards just any person. In the person he actually identifies with one can see his other self reflected. This is most clearly evident in *Orez*, where Orez, the *I*'s son, and as such part of himself, symbolizes the *I*'s ugly side. Although at first the *I* wants to kill his son, the story ends with the *I*'s acceptance of his son, his other self (see also p. 437).

The performance of acts one is not really sure about and the insincerity with oneself, and thus with others as well, constitute a motif which appears in nearly every story. In *Laki-laki tua tanpa nama* the *I* is not quite sure that the sound he has heard was really caused by a pistol being fired, or that it really came from Ny. Casper’s attic, the place where the old man was living. He nevertheless gives the old ladies in the story the impression that he is convinced of this:

‘*Tapi tokh* saya menjawab: “Pestol”.’

‘*Tapi tokh* saya menjawab: “Dari loteng Ny. Casper”.’

‘*Seolah tanpa ragu-ragu* saya menjawab: “Ya”.’
After the old man has been shot dead by Ny. Nolan, the latter utters exactly the same words as the I as a means of clearing herself from blame. By this time, the I has changed his mind and has become convinced that what he has heard that one particular time was not the sound of the old man’s pistol, but that of Ny. Nolan’s.

In Joshua Karabish the I puts his name under Joshua’s poems, thus committing plagiarism. That the I is not quite happy about this is apparent from the fact that he feels guilty, and subsequently the more so when he actually wins a prize with Joshua’s poems. In point of fact there is no need for him to feel guilty, because it was Joshua’s own wish that his poems should be published under someone else’s name. The I tries to rid himself of his feelings of guilt by sending the money he wins to Joshua’s mother. She refuses it, however, and sends him another cheque, thus increasing his feelings of guilt even more.

In Keluarga M the I wants the Meek family to become cacat seumur hidup (BD 1980:46, 47, 50). After a period of sadistic behaviour, in which he thinks up all kinds of fatal plans for this family, which he partly carries out (e.g. his installation of a coca-cola machine in the hope that the Meek children will be seriously injured by the splinters of the bottles — a rather clumsy and cumbersome way of dealing with the situation), something unexpected happens without his intention or knowledge. The Meek family meets with a traffic accident, and two of them are disabled for the rest of their lives, i.e. cacat seumur hidup (BD 1980:56). Once this has happened, the I feels guilty because it had in fact been his wish that some such thing would happen, even though the accident was something over which he had no control. He tries to allay his guilt, but he is again rebuffed. The Meek family does not want any help from anyone, and finally moves out of the I’s field of vision.

In Yorrick the I wants to take revenge on the happy, merry-making group surrounding Yorrick. Atas nama keadilan (BD 1980:110, 111) he calls down a curse upon them all, deflates the tyres of their cars and puts Catherine’s telephone out of order. But once again the I has no control over reality, and no power over real events. That something is going to happen is foreboded by a painful incident. During a game at a party, Ny. Ellison, the very old landlady, picks up a fake skull and a fake coffin. Not long after that she falls as she is dancing and seriously injures her head. Because of the I’s acts of vengeance, it is impossible to phone for an ambulance or take her to hospital by car. Although this was not what the I had intended to happen, he is not very much upset about it in this particular story. In fact, he continues to feel an aversion to Yorrick and the others.

The same theme recurs in Ny. Elberhart. The I here is irritated by the garbage in the garden of Ny. Elberhart, a lonely old widow. He does feel
sorry for the old lady, but instead of helping her, he tries to make her tidy up her garden herself. When after some time her garden does indeed look tidy, Ny. Elberhart looks tired, and eventually turns out to have been taken to hospital. Although it is not clear whether Ny. Elberhart did indeed do the tidying herself, the I feels guilty and believes himself to be responsible for her death.

In Charles Lebourne the I also deflates tyres, namely those of Charles Lebourne's car. Here again Charles Lebourne meets with an accident which is likely to be the result of the deflation of the tyres (BD 1980: 179) and again the I feels guilty.

5. Binding factors and the position of Orez
We have seen how the theme of alienation binds the different stories together and how the I-focalization plays an important role in creating an atmosphere of alienation and confusion, thus reinforcing the theme. Besides these two major binding factors, one can discern motifs connected with the theme that recur again and again, such as: the opposition between the I and the title-figure; illness and death; poetry as a means of living on after death; anonymous letters and the telephone as impersonal means of communication; old widows living on their own; the deflation of tyres with the aim of causing accidents and other ways of harming people and the subsequent feeling of guilt.

Keeping the most striking similarities in mind, we were struck by a certain regularity in the sequence of the stories. We discovered that the stories can be paired off in twos except for Orez, which stands apart. The pairs are: Laki-laki tua tanpa nama – Charles Lebourne; Joshua Karabish – Ny. Elberhart; Keluarga M – Yorrick.

In Laki-laki tua tanpa nama and Charles Lebourne the I is feeling lonely in the impersonal surroundings he is living in. He becomes obsessed by one particular person (laki-laki tua and Charles Lebourne respectively, the latter being believed by the I to be his father). He does his utmost to get in touch with this person.

In Joshua Karabish and Ny. Elberhart it is not in particular the I who is lonely (although he may be so, too), but the person he feels sorry for (Joshua Karabish, Ny. Elberhart). The relation between the I on the one hand and Joshua Karabish or Ny. Elberhart on the other is one which is based on pity (in the I) and need (in Joshua and, to a lesser extent, Ny. Elberhart). The I gets so involved with Joshua/Ny. Elberhart that the two become interwoven with each other and an identification of the one with the other takes place. Illness, death and poetry play an equivalent role in both stories.

In Keluarga M and Yorrick the I is confronted with a group of people (the Meek family and the people surrounding Yorrick). Whereas the I is unsuccessful in mixing with other people and stays alone, the group is a closely-knit one whose members all stand up for each other. In
reaction to this the I is filled with feelings of jealousy and even spite.

That leaves Orez. It is the only story in which the I does not stand alone. Now, we hardly think it likely to be due to mere chance that Orez occupies a central position in the sequence of the seven stories (as number 4) and that the other pairs are arranged symmetrically around this central story: Keluarga M and Yorrick as numbers 3 and 5; Joshua Karabish and Ny. Elberhart as numbers 2 and 6; and finally, Laki-laki tua tanpa nama and Charles Lebourne as numbers 1 and 7. Did all this take place di luar kesadaran saya sendiri, as the author writes?

As far as Orez is concerned, the I is part of a (small) family. He has a wife, Hester, and a son, Orez. But again it is hard to describe the relationship between them as a very natural one. Two key concepts can be distinguished in this story: nafsu binatang and bertanggung jawab.

The marriage of the I and his wife Hester is based on nafsu binatang. But their mutual sexual desire is regarded as something reprehensible and irresponsible even by the I himself. Both their fates seem to be sealed from the very first moment they behave like binatang. Driven by their desire, they leave Hester’s father’s house to make love in the park. On their way there, the I’s attention is attracted by a river:


These two anak sungai may perhaps be regarded as symbols for Hester and the I, Hester being the anak sungai berair keruh. When the two streams meet, the turbid one dominates the clear one. This is also what is going to happen to their child, the result of their union.

As the nafsu binatang is the principal basis of their marriage, ordinary communication between husband and wife is absent. During Hester’s pregnancies, this subject is never discussed. After three miscarriages, Hester tries to provoke an abortion the fourth time she is pregnant. The lack of communication between husband and wife and the lack of sympathy, or even the antipathy, between them creates a rather bizarre impression on the reader. It is difficult to imagine two people being so uncommunicative and nevertheless expecting a baby.

When the I reflects on his role as a father, he decides to become an ayah yang baik, atau lebih tepat, yang bertanggung jawab (BD 1980:75). But the baby which is born is not a healthy infant but a deformed monster, a human beast:

‘Dia suka menjerit tanpa alasan bagaikan Tarzan di tengah hutan memanggil binatang konco-konconya’ (BD 1980:77, 78).26
Orez causes his parents a lot of worry and shame. He is unable to learn to speak, screams extremely loudly and develops an enormous physical strength. He will never be able to become an independent human being.

In the course of a trip alone with his son, the I is tempted to kill him. He puts him on a rock and takes his sword (pedang) to murder him – a situation reminiscent of Abraham being compelled to sacrifice his only son Isaac. The I changes his mind, however. He realizes that he is not a nabi and that God has not commissioned him to do this. He also realizes how much Orez is part of himself, how they both possess the same features, which it is impossible to eradicate. Just like Orez, he is hanyalah seekor binatang (BD 1980:84).

Considering the name Orez, we wondered if it stands for Zero, the result of non-communication, nothingness, someone who is not a human being but simply the personification of physical strength, like an animal.

6. The author’s comments

After our attempts to show how focalization and theme function in the stories of Orang-Orang Bloomington, we would now like to compare our findings with a few statements made by Budi Darma himself in his preface {Mula-mula adalah tema). From its title it is clear that for Budi Darma the theme is the most important. He in fact gives some clues about the theme in his stories:

‘... saya tetap bercerita tentang kekerasan hidup ... Kesulitan orang berhubungan dengan sesamanya dalam mencari identitas dirinya tetap mewarnai cerpen-cerpen saya’ (BD 1980:XII).29

He states that the narrator is a cermin kesengsaraan and that:

‘Hubungan antara narator dengan dunia sekitarnya adalah hubungan yang berdasarkan kepentingan dan bukannya hubungan alamiah’ (BD 1980:XVI).30

That the theme is most important indeed will have become clear from the above. The characters, plot and setting all serve to stress the theme. But while Budi Darma accentuates exclusively the theme, to our mind the I-narrator with his subjective view has a special function in the stories which is of more importance than that of merely sustaining the theme. Without this I-focalization and its effects, the theme of alienation would never have been brought out so convincingly, in the same way as the theme of alienation lends itself excellently to the use of this I-focalization technique as a means of manipulating the reader. Thus they are dependent on one another.

With the importance attached by us to the focalization, we come to a second remark made by Budi Darma, namely that the stories in this
collection are realistic, and not, like previous stories, absurdist (BD 1980:XII). With Sapardi (Sapardi Djoko Damono 1981), we cannot entirely agree with him here. A first impression is that the stories are indeed realistic: the detailed information about Bloomington, its streets, its houses, its university and its people seems realistic enough. Moreover, names of streets and surroundings are conscientiously cited. On the whole, however, the readers when reading and interpreting the stories run up against problems when they try ‘to relate what the text tells them to a level of ordinary human concerns, to the actions and reactions of characters constructed in accordance with models of integrity and coherence’ (Culler 1975:144). Here we come to the point of the vraisemblance of the stories. Budi Darma’s stories are constructed in such a way that the reader will have problems in ‘naturalizing’ them, or in other words, in making them vraisemblable. This is a consequence mainly of the use of the I-focalization. This is very compelling, and the reader is manipulated through it. He is, more or less automatically, inclined to sympathize with the I because he experiences the events described through him. But he may be placed in a dilemma when the I exhibits very sadistic and vindictive behaviour. We do not feel that the term ‘realistic’ fits these stories. We would rather describe them as a presentation of a realistic enough world that is viewed in a somewhat absurdist way. Thus the stories balance on the dividing-line between realism and absurdism.

NOTES

1 This article was inspired by a seminar on Indonesian literature conducted by Prof. A. Tceuw in which each participant had to analyse and interpret one of the short stories of the collection Orang-Orang Bloomington. This resulted in seven essays, written by Sven Aalten, Erna Ammerlaan, Jill Berens, Debby Delima, Marijke Klokke, Martha Louhenapessy and Louis Tigges. Grateful use has been made of these essays as a starting-point for the present article.

2 For the information on magazines in which works of Budi Darma have appeared we are indebted to E.U. Kratz, who sent us a computer print-out of the bibliography he is working on.

3 During the summer I had no problems. At the change of summer to autumn my situation changed... the days became shorter and shorter, the sun rose later and later and set earlier and earlier. The opportunities of going out became slighter and slighter.

4 It seems that by neglecting each other in this way they were able to stay on good terms with each other.

5 Don’t mind other people’s business, and don’t try to be a busybody. That’s the only way we can live in peace with each other.

6 I was only allowed to speak with her if necessary, and even then only by telephone... Then she said that the key she had lent me could only be used for the side-door, whereas her own key was for the front-door. By using different doors, neither of us would be inconvenienced. And each month, she said next, I would have to drop the cheque for the rent for the attic in her letter-box.

7 I am the only one living alone, without a wife and children.

8 And I am still here, still by myself.

9 And then I knew that they went playing with their parents every Saturday and Sunday.
afternoon without fail. They would run about, play on the swings, the merry-go-round
and the monkey-bars, and crawl in and out a heap of barrels together. I often saw
Marion kissing her children and Melvin kissing Marion.
10 The Meek family still frequently visited the play-ground. I often saw them from the
window. And as usual, they were always in harmony.
11 Admittedly everyone welcomed me cordially, but I knew that they did not really care
whether I came or not.
12 I played the role of a spectator.
13 The others joined in, except me of course.
14 I have an ugly (disgusting) appearance and indeed an unattractive personality.
15 . . . that I was not perfect and that I had to suffer because of this shortcoming.
16 What agitated me was the feeling each time I saw my face that whatever I undertook
would never be finished, as though I was fated to be always busy, though without
possessing any direction.
17 Tulip Tree looked like a giant . . . I often idled away my time daydreaming and looking
at Tulip Tree. I was truly amazed at it. Especially in bad weather . . . Then Tulip Tree
would be vaguely visible, all the more proud, strong and powerful . . . It would be
twinkling away, never dying.
18 . . . I know how it is with people reading death notices . . . After reading, they throw
away the paper without any remaining trace of an impression. Or sometimes they
think, “So Wilson’s died. What a pity.” Or they just won’t read them at all. It is just the
same with people hearing death announcements on the radio. Sometimes they are
upset, and then quickly switch off the radio or find another station.
19 I could write poetry at any time, any place and in the midst of any activity. Working on
this or that, I would finish a dozen poems in the span of one day. I would finish
hundreds of poems in the span of one week.
20 Rather dirty, long-haired, looking as though they seldom bathe and seldom clean their
teeth.
21 Whether Ny. Elberhart’s name was there or not, they couldn’t care less. Whether Ny.
Elberhart’s name occurred one or several times, they wouldn’t know. And whether Ny.
Elberhart was still alive or had entered her grave, that was of no concern to them,
either. The meaning of Ny. Elberhart’s name here was no different from what was
contained in the death notice some time earlier.
22 One night I woke up because my throat was burning hot, my nose was sore as though a
leech had got inside it, and my ears were ringing and feeling swollen inside.
23 Gradually I was beginning to hope that my nose would start bleeding again, but this
wish was not fulfilled. And the result of Doctor White’s examination was the same as
before. He said my ears, my nose and my throat were healthy.
24 Even so I answered: “A pistol”.
Even so I answered: “From Ny. Casper’s attic”.
As if without any hesitation I answered: “Yes”.
As if without any hesitation I said: “Ny. Casper’s attic”.
25 This river formed the junction of two tributaries. The tributary that was further from
the Union building was flowing with clear water and that nearer the Union building
with turbid water. After meeting to become one, all this mixed water became turbid
and showed no sign of clearness at all.
26 He liked to scream without any reason, like Tarzan in the jungle calling his animal
friends.
27 He ate just like a swine — quickly, greedily, making smacking noises.
28 Then, like a hungry lion, Orez roared, leaped and pounced on me.
29 I go on writing about the harshness of life. The problems of people in their relations
with their fellows as they search for their own identity continue to colour my stories.
30 The relationship between the narrator and the world around him is a relationship that
is based on self-interest and is not a natural relationship.
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