

Hanna Rambe's *Mirah of Banda* as a 'Quiet' Narrative on Livability

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Abstract

Hanna Rambe's *Mirah of Banda* presents the life of the protagonist from the age of five to her twilight years, as a kidnapped child, nutmeg worker on contract, concubine of the Dutch master and cook in the modern Indonesian household. In the process, it captures the vicissitudes of her life against the historical background of the Dutch colonial era, Japanese occupation, Revolution and contemporary times in Indonesia. Read in this light, the text reveals a life of slavery and servitude with implications on an individual's human rights as well as the precarious nature of the lives of the marginalised. The present study uses the framework of a 'quiet' narrative on livability to establish the moments of performativity in the text as well as to examine the idea of a life of dignity during crisis moments in history.

Keywords: human rights narrative, Indonesian history, precarity and performativity, quiet narrative, livability.

Introduction

"... I had been a slave with no rights at all. I didn't need to think, make decisions, or act. There was no opportunity to quarrel, to have a difference of opinion or to feel worried about anything. Everything was planned. I was a slave: a living, breathing puppet" (Rambe, 2010, p.163). These are the words uttered by Mirah, the protagonist to sum up her life as a child kidnapped from Java by a Dutch plantation owner. She spends the rest of her life in the nutmeg plantation in Banda alternatively as a servant, maid-in-waiting to the Dutch estate owner's wife, nutmeg picker on contract and as the *nyai* or concubine of the Dutch owner. She bears him two children but has no social claims over them. Mirah's life unravels and parallels the history of Indonesia from the Dutch colonisation, Japanese Occupation during the second World War, the Revolution with its memories of the Sukarno and Suharto era down to contemporary times. On a surface reading, the life of Mirah is an illustration of a human rights narrative, which highlights the precariousness in the lives of vulnerable and marginalised groups in history all over the world. However, a closer reading reveals the agency exercised by Mirah in her attempts to take decisions about her life. However, these instances are not foregrounded in bold brush strokes in the narrative. This aspect propels the readers to consider the text not only as a human rights narrative but also as a 'quiet' narrative on livability.

Reading Frames for a Human Rights Narrative

The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report (1998)* establishes an interesting intersection between human rights discourse and literature. Human rights missions are not only attempts to rescue the victims of different kinds of violence but also to provide a voice, and through it, an agency to the victims. Story-telling becomes a “therapeutic process of giving victims an opportunity to tell their stories” and utilise the “healing potential of telling stories.” (Dawes, 2009, p.395)

Based on their structure, human rights narratives can be grouped under two broad categories: justice plot and escape plot. Justice plot can be termed a narrative of “return, violation and investigation” where the primary attempt is to repair the damage caused to the victim. Following the structure of a detective novel, the justice plot provides a “centripetal narrative” which spirals inward to focus on the individual victim. (Dawes, 2016, p.137). In contrast, the escape plot provides a “narrative of departure.” Following the structure of a picaresque novel, the escape plot provides a “centrifugal narrative” which arcs outside and foregrounds “a world of moral chaos.” (Dawes, 2016, pp.137-152) Thus, the escape plot presents a first person narrator, who is socially marginalised and appears to move “laterally from one disaster to another [with a] sense of inevitability.” (Dawes, 2016, p.152)

Mirah of Banda follows the escape plot and Hanna Rambe weaves the travails of a little girl from Java, whose life is punctuated by different forms of oppression, thus highlighting the plight of an ordinary individual in the extraordinary welter of Indonesian history. In doing so, it also raises some pertinent issues which involves a series of paradoxes. Stating that five types of paradoxes exist in human rights narratives, Dawes explains the need to identify and negotiate them. The paradox of beauty focusses on the “aesthetic experience [that] promotes human dignity” even while it runs the danger of “cloaking ideologies that diminish human dignity.” The paradox of truth promotes the idea of truth in human rights narratives but “what counts as truth is not grounded.” Similarly, the paradox of description presents language as a protective boundary but words “also imprison and constrain” the extent of representation. The major concern in all human rights narratives relates to the extent to which human suffering can be and need to be presented. While the depiction of “inhuman treatment is important in supporting the human rights regime,” it can cause unintended suffering. The paradox of suffering is closely bound to the paradox of witnessing because “speaking for others is both a way of rescuing and usurping the other’s voice.” (Dawes 2009; 395-396) These paradoxes not only serve to conceptualise the scope and boundary of human rights narratives but are also used “to prescribe and proscribe the sort of life one has and leads” (Dawes, 2009, pp.395-396)

Precarity as a Space for Negotiation

Dawes’ schematisation of the narrative structures and the paradoxes they encompass illustrate Judith Butler’s notion of “precarity” which refers to “conditions that threaten life in ways that appear to be outside of one’s control.” (Butler, 2009, p.1) In her study on “Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics,” Butler defines precarity as the “differential allocation of recognizability” resulting out of “the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and are at heightened risk of exposure to violence without protection.” (Butler, 2009, p.2) This interpretation places precarity in opposition to performativity, which presupposes agency and produces a “recognizable subject.” (Butler, 2009, p.12) However, as Butler points out, precarity and performativity are not mutually exclusive

categories. They can and do combine in different ways to produce differing results. For instance, performativity need not always be expressed through direct and specified ways of articulation, such as resistance or subversion. Social norms, which are “vectors of power and history” can be interrogated and recast when “certain historical convergences of norms at the site [of] embodied personhood opens up possibilities for action.” (Butler, 2009, pp.11-12) However, Elizabeth Anker sounds a note of caution. While there is a belief that human rights initiatives/ narratives “will safeguard the human person from abuse, torture, pain, suffering and other corporeal deprivation,” they also “smuggle in an array of biases and other exclusions, which have historically authorized the denial of human rights to different populations.” (Anker, 2014, p.12) This context necessitates the readers “to eschew the sensational and focus on the quotidian and everyday deprivations and disenfranchisements that also constitute human rights violations.” (Srikanth, 2014, p.79)

Quiet Narrative on Livability

In her study on the “Quiet Prose and Bare Life: Why We Should Eschew the Sensational in Human Rights Language,” Rajini Srikanth emphasises “the heuristic value of the seemingly insignificant, the power of the everyday, and the weight of the apparently trivial within the context of human rights narratives.” (Srikanth, 2014, p.80) Foregrounding the notion of “restrained articulation,” her study describes narratives of human rights which are “devoid of rhetoric and diction that is laden with images of obvious cruelty and abuse.” (Srikanth, 2014, p. 80) In doing so, the study enables readers “to discern the monumental apparatus of oppression that regulates all aspects of an individual’s or group’s life, even if the everyday manifestation of such oppression does not take the form of killing, abduction, torture, or other extreme forms of mental and bodily injury.” (Srikanth, 2014, p.80) The concept of a quiet narrative also forces a change in the perception of precarity not only as an existential condition but also a “social condition” of livability (McNeilly, 2016) “When we ask what makes a life livable, we are asking about certain normative conditions that must be fulfilled for life to become life.” (Judith Butler qtd in McNeilly, 2016)

Narrativisation of Livability

In *Mirah of Banda*, Hanna Rambe has chosen to present “everyday deprivations that accumulate to become a multi-generational legacy” rather than a “sensational narrative.” (Srikanth, 2014, p. 79) *Mirah* narrates her life story to Wendy Morgan who is visiting the holiday home of her friends, Jack and Ratna in Bandaneira. The first four chapters provide the context to *Mirah*’s life story by outlining the history of Indonesia through successive colonisations and conquests. As Jack points out, nutmeg and mace were not only used to flavour food but also “involved tremendous sacrifice, even to the point [when] a whole population was wiped out because of it.” (Rambe, 2010, p. 27) So, it becomes difficult to decide “whether the trees of fragrant golden fruit were a blessing or a curse for the Bandanese.” (Rambe, 2010, p. 59)

Mirah’s life is recorded from the age of five when she is kidnapped by the overseer, when her cousin Karsih is taken as a contract labourer. The entire kidnapping incident is stated as a commonplace event which does not involve any physical abuse or torture. In fact, *Mirah* recalls the affection shown by the other contract workers and the overseer. Even the Dutch plantation owner is presented as a rounded character. Witness, *Mirah*’s description of her first meeting with Tuan Besar, the Dutch plantation owner: “I stepped forward, bent over in fear. I looked up and

our eyes met. It was very strange: in those eyes, which were such a different color from mine, I found warmth. My fear disappeared the minute I looked into those eyes. And I even felt a surge of happiness when he touched my chin as he tilted my face.” (Rambe, 2010, p. 71) When Karsih’s contract period completes, she marries Lajamu but Tuan Besar refuses to send Mirah with her. As Mirah points out, “In our life on the plantation there was never any choice. All we could do was accept our fate with a nod of the head. Saying no was unknown in the life of a contract worker.” (Rambe, 2010, p. 75)

At this point in her life, Mirah faces more trouble from the other servants in the plantation. “... all the servants hated me. I didn’t understand why; but unless they were forced to, they didn’t speak to me In the evenings they’d often pull my hair. I just kept quiet , never daring to stand up to them. Anyway, where would I go to complain? The other servants were all strangers to me, but they were also outcasts who’d been bought by the masters and forced to obey their orders.” (Rambe, 2010, p. 76) This statement problematises the notion of a one way domination and oppression because power pervades and percolates through the social hierarchy.

In contrast, Mirah finds Tuan Besar’s wife to be very supportive. For instance, when Mirah starts menstruating for the first time, Nonya Besar assures her that “It’s quite normal. Every woman goes through this. You’re growing up, that’s all.” (Rambe, 2010, p.79) She also teaches Mirah how to use the cloth napkin for her periods. Mirah also finds a mentor and adviser in Watimah, the cook in Tuan Besar’s house. Similarly, Mirah learns about her religion only when she goes for the first time to attend the death vigil for a deceased plantation worker. “We are Muslims. We believe Allah rules over the heavens, the earth and the seas God, death, graves. When I was big I’d learn to recite the Quran. What did all mean? I didn’t know, but I nodded anyway.” (Rambe, 2010, pp. 83-84) In Mirah’s case, basic awareness of identity markers such as her sexual corporeality, religion, birth and death remain unknown elements because she has been forcibly removed from her family. To this extent, human rights narratives are “related to identity politics, which encompasses the fault lines of class, race, gender and sexuality.” (Dawes, 2009, p. 400)

Mirah’s growth into adulthood is paralleled by her work as a nutmeg picker on contract. While she is unnerved by the change, Watimah provides a sense of home when they move to live in the barracks. At this time, Mirah also gets close to Lawao, who is Lajamu’s son from his previous marriage. The relationship between Mirah and Lawao continues in spite of several exigencies. Lawao not only gives practical advice to Mirah but also projects the hope of forming a family unit through marriage. That Lawao provides her a sense of peace is revealed in her words: “... the fear and confusion always disappeared when Lawao came. It was enough for me to look into his warm eyes and at his finely drawn lips. And when he smiled at me it was like entering the shelter of the peaceful nutmeg trees, far from all threats of dangers.” (Rambe, 2010, p. 91)

Mirah’s confidence grows in her relationship with Lawao and it gives her the courage to defend herself when the *marinyo* guard of the plantation tries to molest her. In Mirah’s words, “[t]he struggle turned violent, but my strength only grew with the overwhelming anger surging through me Suddenly I tripped and was knocked to the ground. I was afraid he had me. But just as he moved over me I suddenly sat up and shoved my head between his legs, my teeth biting down as hard as they could. The *marinyo* screamed as he tried to break free The *marinyo* fainted. I was glad.” (Rambe, 2010, p. 98) This is the first time in the narrative when Mirah stands up for herself. However, she is unable to defend herself when Tuan Besar arrives on the scene. However, this is less out of fear but more out of her knowledge about the estate owner. “How could I tell him? Tuan Besar himself had a habit of seducing girls on the plantation. Only too

often I'd heard of women falling victim to the estate men. No one dared to stand up to them. No one protected them." (Rambe, 2010, p. 99) In this instance, Tuan Besar protects Mirah. However, Mirah realises later that "his kindness wasn't motivated by the desire to do the right thing or to protect a poor soul like me. Rather it had a sting in it that was change the path of my life." (Rambe, 2010, p. 99).

Mirah becomes the concubine or *nyai* of Tuan Besar. Watimah's advice to Mirah echoes the absence of choice in the lives of the vulnerable. "We're contract women, Mirah. If a plantation owner takes one of us as *nyai*, the best thing to do is just accept it. You can live better than a nutmeg picker. So Watimah advised me to follow the custom that was deeply rooted on the plantations. Being me, a lowly plantation woman whose fate was in the hands of the owner meant I could be toyed with like a doll." (Rambe, 2010, p.107). The situation highlights the precariousness in the conditions of the oppressed but it also reveals an aware acceptance of the inevitable.

Mirah's position in the plantation improves after she becomes Tuan Besar's *nyai* in terms of the respect she receives from the other workers. She bears him a daughter Lili and a son Weli. In Mirah's own words, "Tuan Besar paid a lot of attention to my emotional welfare." (Rambe, 2010, p.111). She is given freedom to move around the plantation and also visit others outside the plantation and take part in *wayang* or dance performances. A particular incident becomes important in the narrative because it simultaneously reveals the changes in attitudes of Tuan Besar and Mirah towards each other. When Mirah explains to Tuan Besar about the dragon carriage procession that is part of the Chinese New Year celebrations, "He asked if I wanted one for Lili and Weli. I replied that of course I wanted my children to have fun like other children. Tuan Besar stared at me in surprise. 'What did you say? Your children?' 'Yes,' I answered, astonished. He laughed. 'Your children! They are my children too, aren't they?' My surprise turned to shock. My children and Tuan Besar's children? It was a miracle. Except for our coming together as two human beings, I hadn't found any other thing of importance in my life with Tuan Besar. In that moment *I felt the deep hatred in my heart for him and for all things Dutch begin to lessen. Despite the fact that he was the Dutchman who had found it in him to kidnap another human being to be his slave, clearly he was also human.*" (Rambe, 2010, p.112. Emphasis added) This incident foregrounds the ambivalence in human rights narratives and interrogates the binary division between the oppressor and oppressed or the perpetrator and the victim. Tuan Besar also advises her to convert to Christianity so that they can marry and the "children would be legitimate and have rights as his heirs." (Rambe, 2010, p.120) Mirah refuses the offer because of her love for Lawao and the hope that he would return one day. Lawao returns and they plan to elope because for Mirah, "the attraction of Lawao was greater than [her] love for Lili and Weli." (Rambe, 2010, p.130) Their plan misfires and Mirah returns to Banda.

The arrival of the Japanese army in Banda results in large scale atrocities against the Dutch. Tuan Besar and Weli are forcibly evicted out of the house. This necessitates Mirah to take charge and make decisions to protect Lili but the latter is taken away by the Japanese in the pretext of sending her to study nursing and treat the soldiers at war. However, Lili ends up as a comfort woman for the Japanese soldiers. The end of the World War results in the formation of an independent Indonesia in which "We were free! No longer slaves or under colonial rule. We were equals of the Dutch and the Japanese." (Rambe, 2010, p.154). Normally, the narrative should have ended here with Mirah marrying Lawao. Their marriage takes place but the loss of Lili and Weli as well as the fact that they never have children breaks apart the relationship. On Mirah's insistence, Lawao re-marries and leaves Banda.

With this, Mirah's life comes full circle till she meets Wendy Morgan. "The woman's eyes, radiating a warmth that soothed the heart, had sparked in Mirah a flash of memory of Tuan Besar and Lili." (Rambe, 2010, p.166) Caught in the class based and linguistic barriers, Mirah is unable "to translate her feelings" to Wendy. On her part, Wendy is unable to fit the pieces of the jigsaw regarding her birth as a war baby. "So the voices of the two women stayed buried deep inside, each keeping her secrets to herself." (Rambe, 2010, p.166) As the novel ends, the mystery remains unravelled because "upon their deaths Lili Amelia Setin and Toshiro Miyazaki [Wendy's biological parents] left no mementos whatsoever for their child." (Rambe, 2010, p.186). To this extent, the text is open ended. In doing so, it avoids the pitfall that faces human rights narratives. "To satisfy readers, plots must entail their endings, but entailment in the novel of human rights is a risk." (Dawes, 2016, p.153)

Conclusion

Mirah of Banda is not loud in its claims or presentation. Thus there is no grand climax that highlights or resolves the victim's plight. Instead, there is a representation of the continuous strategies and decisions made by the protagonist to live a life of dignity. Terming this as "an ethics of recognition," Eleni Coundouriotis and Lauren Goodlad point out how narratives on livability "enact not only through the detailed illustration of suffering but also through powerful moments of self-assertion." (2010, p.123) Further, the narrative is not structured on binaries of oppressor-oppressed, man-woman, coloniser-colonised or good-evil. The characteristic feature of the narrative is the ways in which it projects the interactions of an ordinary individual with extraordinary forces of history. In doing so, it differentiates the important role played by culture in the human rights discourse. The human envisioned by human rights is bound by the law and the state but the human presented in literature and culture is situated in the broader discourse on humanism. (Eleni Coundouriotis and Lauren Goodlad, 2010, p.122) Further, a quiet narrative on livability presents both a life strategy and a theoretical frame for interpretation.

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