

# Powerful Silence as a Decolonizing Writing Strategy in Maria Dermoût's *De juwelen haarkam*

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## Abstract

In this article, I analyze Maria Dermoût's short story *De juwelen haarkam* ("The Jeweled Hair Comb"), a literary retelling of an anticolonial revolt that took place in the Dutch East Indies in 1817. I argue that Dermoût's use of silence in this story is a decolonizing writing strategy used to disrupt the authority attached to the colonial voices that have shaped the current-day collective memory of this event. By finding ways to replace dominant historical voices with forms of indeterminate

silence, Dermoût rewrites history not by forcing her own voice upon it, but instead by granting it silence, which allows for the anticolonial resistance to be remembered differently. This article thus offers a critical reassessment of the logocentrism evident in much cultural theory and activism, in which 'voice' is reduced to a metaphor for empowerment and 'silence' to its negative counterpart, indicating powerlessness. My reading of Dermoût's work shows how silence itself can be powerful.

## Introduction

The work of Dutch East Indies author Maria Dermoût (1888-1962) is characterized by her uncommon approach to storytelling: she writes in a hesitant style, in which much seems to happen between the lines, and in which abundant silences are incorporated into the speech of her characters. Literary theorist Pamela Pattynama remarks that

Dermoût grew up with the oral art of storytelling that was developed among Indonesians and Indos.<sup>1</sup> Her much-praised ‘pointillistic’ approach to storytelling to great extent resembles spoken language, and consists of repetitions, pauses, short dialogues, parlando, silence, short words and sentences that frequently end abruptly. (“Totdat Constance kwam” 142)<sup>2</sup>

Literary critic Rob Nieuwenhuys is less positive about Dermoût’s so-called *pointillism*: “The frequent use of diminutives, of little repetitions, of omissions and inversions, of dashes and dot-dot-dots, point toward a too dominant fixation on aesthetic concerns, which hurts her already somewhat thin talent” (qtd. in Agerbeek 99-102).<sup>3</sup>

What Nieuwenhuys’s negative assessment has in common with Pattynama’s positive assessment of Dermoût’s writing is that both interpret her storytelling technique as a stylistic choice: Nieuwenhuys interprets it as evidence of her limited talent, and Pattynama interprets it as a form of paying respect to the oral tradition that she witnessed growing up in the Dutch East Indies. Unlike Nieuwenhuys and Pattynama, I interpret Dermoût’s writing style not as a stylistic but

<sup>1</sup> The term Indo in the Dutch language refers to people with a mixed Dutch and Indonesian background.

<sup>2</sup> This translation and all subsequent translations in this article are mine. “Dermoût groeide op met de orale vertelkunst die onder Indonesiërs en Indo’s ontwikkeld is. Haar veelgeroemde ‘pointillistische’ vertelwijze imiteert grotendeels spreektaal en bestaat uit herhalingen, pauzes, korte dialogen, parlando, stiltes, korte woorden en telkens afgebroken zinnen.”

<sup>3</sup> “Het veelvuldig gebruik van verkleinwoordjes, van herhalinkjes, van weglatingen en inversies, van gedachtestreepjes en puntjes, puntjes, wijzen op een te grote esthetische bekommernis, die haar toch al wat ijle talent schaadt.”

as a political choice. I argue that her use of silence is part of her *decolonizing* writing strategy. For the latter term, I follow the definition of postcolonial theorists Bill Ashcroft et al., who describe it as “the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms. This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved” (52).

I develop this analysis by close-reading passages from Dermoût’s short story *De juwelen haarkam* (“The Jeweled Hair Comb”). Her story is based on the history of a revolt against Dutch colonial rule that took place on the Moluccan islands in 1817. The Dutch marine Quirijn Maurits Rudolph (Q.M.R.) Ver Huell (1787-1860) witnessed the revolt from up close and reported about it in his memoir, *Herinneringen aan eene reis naar de Oost-Indiën* (“Memories of a Journey to the East Indies”). According to historian Hans Straver, Ver Huell’s report was “not a methodical description and analysis of the revolt, the historical backgrounds or the parties involved” (166).<sup>4</sup> Instead, his aim was to demonstrate “that ‘the glory of the Dutch flag’ had been upheld as the Moluccan region was returned under its rule” (166).<sup>5</sup> As such, Ver Huell’s writings had an ideological purpose, that is, to reinforce the legitimacy of Dutch colonial rule.

His account has been decisive for the way in which the Moluccan revolt has entered history, with Dutch and even post-independence Indonesian historians still basing their knowledge on it.<sup>6</sup> My close-reading of Dermoût’s literary retelling of the revolt shows how she uses silence as a way to disrupt the authority attached to Ver Huell’s colonial voice. In her story, Ver Huell is reimagined as a reluctant and unreliable narrator, whose memory of the revolt is communicated not through what he says, but through what he refuses to or cannot say. In order to become attentive to this implicit form of communication, I follow what

<sup>4</sup> “geen methodische beschrijving en analyse van de opstand, de historische achtergronden of de strijdende partijen.”

<sup>5</sup> “dat ‘de roem van de Nederlandsche vlag’ bij het terugbrengen van de Molukken onder het gezag was gehandhaafd.”

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Indonesian nationalist appropriations of Ver Huell’s memoir, see van Engelenhoven.

cultural theorist Stephen Ahern has called literary criticism's "turn to affect" (2). That is, I focus on the "affective phenomena produced by what remains unsaid, unspoken, but nevertheless actualized in a text as a virtual feeling of intensity" (12). Turning to affect in my analysis enables me to analyze what happens in "the silence of the text" (12).

The purpose of this approach is to offer a critical reassessment of the logocentrism evident in much cultural theory and activism, in which 'voice' is reduced to a metaphor for empowerment and 'silence' to its negative counterpart, indicating powerlessness. Especially in postcolonial theory silence is commonly understood as the result of silencing, and therefore as something to be overcome, usually through the act of speaking. This can for instance be read in the answer which literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak provides to her own question "Can the subaltern speak?": "If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern anymore" (283). My reading of Dermoût's work aims to offer nuance to this axiom, by showing that silence is not always the passive result of being silenced. Silence can be active and deliberate. Once silences are understood as forms of expression alongside the more obvious verbal forms, it becomes possible to develop ways of listening to one another beyond what is explicitly voiced.

### ***De juwelen haarkam's* Silent Protagonist**

Literary theorist Frans-Willem Korsten has pointed out that despite the fact that Dermoût's work is "not particularly well known for its political content," *De juwelen haarkam* is "remarkably political, although the political issue is addressed 'on the side'" (17). Dermoût's indirect approach to addressing political history can be identified most clearly in her decision not to focus her retelling of the Moluccan revolt on any of its central participants, but instead to place the event's most prominent historical source at the center of attention: Dutch marine Q.M.R. Ver Huell, who witnessed the revolt and wrote about his experience in the memoir which he published in two parts, in 1835 and 1836.

In *De juwelen haarkam*, Dermoût introduces him by his first name, Quirien, and describes him as someone who "has come from far away,"

and who fears that “he does not belong here anymore,” meaning the Netherlands (303; 330).<sup>7</sup> Throughout my analysis, I use ‘Quirien’ to refer to Dermoût’s protagonist, and ‘Ver Huell’ to refer to the historical person on which the character is based. Dermoût’s story tells of Quirien’s return to the Netherlands in 1819 after his four-year stay in the colony, and takes place on the evening of his arrival in his family’s home, where he is received by his parents and his four siblings. His family is eager to hear about his experience of the Moluccan revolt, but Quirien is reluctant to share his story: “Quirien preferred not to talk and he did not want to tell stories; one story in particular he did not want to tell” (306).<sup>8</sup> This is a first indication that Dermoût tells the history of the revolt through silence. That is, the revolt materializes through its most prominent source’s continued unwillingness to speak about it.

As such, the setting of Dermoût’s story presents a different, more unstable, premise for Quirien’s account of the revolt than the memoir of Ver Huell. The latter introduced his account rather confidently, with the following motivation:

After all, the revolt has nowhere been described accurately. Therefore, I saw it as my duty to present my fellow countrymen with the history of how these delightful, fertile and precious islands were returned under lawful authority, including all the circumstances concerning this battle. (xiv-xv)<sup>9</sup>

As this citation indicates, Ver Huell presents his account as a matter of national duty, and as a provision of structure and clarity to a thus far fragmented knowledge. Unlike Ver Huell’s self-representation as an essential voice of history, however, Dermoût’s Quirien is unwilling

<sup>7</sup> “Hij kwam van ver weg”; “hoorde hij niet meer aan hier.”

<sup>8</sup> “Quirien wilde liever niet praten en hij wilde geen verhalen vertellen, een verhaal wilde hij niet vertellen.”

<sup>9</sup> “Men vindt immers nergens dien strijd met naauwkeurigheid beschreven; ik achtte het dus pligtmatic de geschiedenis van het terugbrengen van deze heerlijke, vruchtbare en kostbare eilanden onder het wettig gezag, met al de omstandigheden dezen krijgstoestand betreffende, mijnen landgenooten aan te bieden.”

to share his experiences. He is portrayed as a self-doubting rather than confident narrator. Dermoût thus replaces the dominant historical voice of Ver Huell by the hesitant silence of Quirien. Throughout the story, his silence is manifested in two different ways: first through his *refusal*, and then through his *inability* to speak. In the next two sections, I analyze both of these manifestations of silence by close-reading selections from the story.

### **Silence as the Refusal to Speak**

The first type of silence that can be identified in *De juwelen haarkam* manifests in Quirien's refusal to speak, and features in the first twenty pages of the story (301-21). This part concerns Quirien's arrival at his family's house in the Netherlands, and his subsequent attempts to postpone speaking about the revolt by speaking in abundant detail about other topics. Quirien's silence about the revolt is here thus not manifested in the absence of his speech as such, but is instead felt indirectly, through Quirien's excessive speech about everything but the revolt. Dermoût accomplishes this indirect silence through multiple enumerations of objects and facts that seem to be aimed at derailing the story.

For example, near the beginning of the story Quirien recalls a shipwreck that he experienced on his way home, and lists many of his possessions that were lost in it as well as those that were saved. Of the objects that were saved, Quirien mentions

his sketchbook, several trinkets packed together in a little box: some pearls, a tiny tiny ring, a golden filigree snake, *a woman's jeweled comb to wear in one's chignon*, these things were saved; [...] and most importantly, first and foremost, a pirogue, a Moluccan war pirogue, one ell long, with masts

and flags and pennons and rowers with oars and warriors  
with spears, all of it made of cloves. (302; emphasis added)<sup>10</sup>

Among this seemingly random list of objects, the important one is hidden in the middle: the jeweled hair comb, to which the story's title also refers. This comb features dominantly in Ver Huell's memoir. According to him, Moluccan revolt leader Captain Pattimura looted the comb from the wife of the Dutch Governor on the island Saparua, whose family was the initial target of the revolt. The Dutch army confiscated the comb from Pattimura when he was captured and hanged, after the revolt was defeated on 16 December 1817. By mentioning the comb, Dermoût makes an implicit reference to the revolt, but hides it in an abundance of seemingly irrelevant details, so that it would become an easy reference to miss, were it not for the story's title. Because the comb is mentioned several more times throughout Dermoût's story, and always as an aside, it introduces the anticolonial revolt as an untold history, paradoxically present as an absence.

This strategy is repeated several times throughout the next few pages. Not long after his arrival in his family's home, Quirien's sister urges him to talk about the revolt. He avoids heeding her request by once again enumerating facts about the shipwreck: "Quirien mentioned a few things that were lost, told his mother about the little orchids for the orangery of grandma: Moluccan orchids of that one small island, in all shades of lilac and purple, a stray white among them here and there" (310).<sup>11</sup> These enumerations of objects function on two levels. Within the story, Quirien uses these lists in order to stall the topic of the revolt. But on the level of Dermoût's narration, the story itself has a tendency of focusing on these lists as well. As a result, not only Quirien's family within the story world, but the reader too can 'feel' the presence of the

<sup>10</sup> "zijn schetsboek, nog wat kostbaarheden in een doosje bij elkaar gepakt: losse parels, een klein klein ringetje, een gouden filigrain slang, een juwelen vrouwenkam om in de haarwring te steken, dat was gered; [...] en vooral, en niet te vergeten, de prauw, een Molukse oorlogsprauw, een el lang, met masten en vlaggen en wimpels en roeiers met roeispanen en krijgers met speren, alles van kruidnagelen."

<sup>11</sup> "Quirien noemde een paar dingen op die verloren waren gegaan, vertelde zijn moeder van de orchideeënplantjes voor de oranjerie van Grand-maman: Molukse orchideeën van dat ene kleine eiland, in alle tinten van lila en paars, een verdwaalde witte er soms tussen."

revolt as a loud silence; the revolt is present implicitly, between the lines of Quirien's excessive enumerations.

Affect theory provides tools to analyze this loud silence. Media theorists Michael Richardson and Kyla Allison trace affect theory back to philosopher Brian Massumi, who described affect as "the autonomous force of relation between bodies in encounter with one another and the world" (238). By realizing that "the body is affected and affecting, moved and moving, even when it cannot or will not speak in words," it becomes possible to analyze "what happens between one person and another" when "words fail, fall short, or cannot be uttered" (238). By paying attention to affect, that is, one can interpret meaning that is communicated beyond words.

This consideration is helpful for analyzing how the silent presence of colonialism is manifested in Dermoût's story: it is the effect of a tangible discrepancy between what Quirien says on the one hand, and on the other hand what he does not say, but which can nevertheless be discerned from his physical presence and behavior. In the story, Quirien is described as "still a very young man, thin, blond, with light-grey eyes, in a long, dark marine officer's coat, two epaulettes, a dark bicorn; he looked exhausted and ill." (301)<sup>12</sup> Throughout the story, his travel-worn and absent-minded state is frequently emphasized. By imagining Quirien in this way, Dermoût imbues Quirien's silence with a physical vulnerability. Quirien may not be talking about his time in the colony, but the effects of this time are shown on his body nonetheless. His body silently communicates what his speech cannot.

In short, by deploying what biographer Kester Freriks has called "the incantatory power of enumeration" (676)<sup>13</sup>, Dermoût paradoxically uses repeated speech to both reveal and conceal that which remains unsaid: she summons silence through speech, and does this in such a way that her protagonist's silence often says more than his speech does. In the next section, I close-read passages from the last part of the story,

<sup>12</sup> "Een nog erg jonge man, mager, blond, met lichtgrijze ogen, in een lange donkere zeeofficiersjas, twee epauletten, een donkere tweekantige steek; hij zag er vermoeid en slecht uit."

<sup>13</sup> "de bezwerende kracht van de opsomming."

in which Quirien's refusal to address the revolt turns into his inability to do so.

## Silence as the Inability to Speak

The second type of silence that can be identified in Dermoût's story appears as Quirien's inability to speak, and features in the last ten pages of the story (321-30). This part takes place in Quirien's bedroom, at the close of the day of his return. His mother comes up to his room to say good night. Here, the story's emphasis on silence is manifested through the communication breakdown that happens between Quirien and his mother when they both realize that there is a distance between them that can no longer be bridged: "they both did not speak at first, neither of them [...] as if both did not really know what to say, how to say it, where to start after 'tonight'" (323).<sup>14</sup> In this fragment, silence is thus a shared sense of the inability to speak.

In this awkward silence between mother and son, Dermoût shares Quirien's doubts about discussing the revolt. He asks himself: "Should he tell her? Why should he tell her, why not? [...] At some point it would have to be told" (325).<sup>15</sup> He then finally decides to describe the end of the revolt to her: the execution of Captain Pattimura. The description he provides marks a significant moment in the story, as it is written in a different style from the rest of the story. Dermoût cites much of it directly from Ver Huell's memoir. If the change in style itself does not already give away this concealed citation, she provides a hint halfway through Quirien's recollection: "The son continued speaking as if he had written it down somewhere and was reciting it, he also used different words than usual; is this how it had been written in his diary?" (326).<sup>16</sup>

Seeing how this is the first time Quirien willingly speaks about the revolt, it is remarkable that Dermoût chooses to cite the historical

<sup>14</sup> "zij zeiden eerst niets, geen van beiden [...] alsof zij niet goed wisten wat te zeggen, hoe het te zeggen, waar te beginnen na 'vanavond'."

<sup>15</sup> "Zou hij het haar zeggen? Waarom zou hij het haar zeggen, waarom niet? [...] Het zou op een keer gezegd moeten worden."

<sup>16</sup> "De zoon sprak verder alsof hij het ergens opgeschreven had en het voorlas, hij gebruikte ook andere woorden dan gewoonlijk; had het zo in zijn dagboek gestaan?"

author on which her protagonist is based. At this moment in the story, in which historical source and literary retelling align, the story ironically feels the most detached from itself, mainly because Dermoût keeps the fact that she is citing from an external source implicit. Dermoût uses this implicit citing technique in many of her stories. Pattynama has called it the “embedding of known topoi and stories, so that the resulting hodgepodge of just about, or not quite recognizable citations opens a new perspective on old history” (“Herinneringsliteratuur” 213).<sup>17</sup>

The communication breakdown that is felt in this disjointed passage continues when, after Quirien stops talking, his mother does not immediately respond: “It became quiet in the room again; the apparitions that her son had summoned faded and disappeared to the secret realms from whence they had come” (327).<sup>18</sup> After a moment of silence, Quirien’s mother responds by returning to the story’s previous method, that of enumeration. She begins mentioning a long list of memories from Quirien’s childhood, listing people, places, events, sounds and smells, in an attempt to reconnect him to his past. Throughout his mother’s long list of offered memories, Quirien once again either remains silent or responds evasively. As before, the excessive enumeration of seemingly irrelevant things allows for a loud silence to make itself known: the silent realization that Quirien’s time in the colony has affected him in ways that cannot be reversed.

This passage is an example of what Ahern calls “the literary text as register of the ineffable shimmerings of embodied being, figured forth especially in moments of heightened affective charge” (8). Colonization’s effect of displacement is not explicitly mentioned by Quirien or his mother, but is nevertheless an affectively charged presence in the room, manifested in the embodied relationship between mother and son. Their relationship exceeds language: they share history and love too complex to reduce to descriptions, as becomes clear in Quirien’s mother’s frustrated attempt to reconnect him to his childhood by

<sup>17</sup> “inbedden van bekende topoi en verhalen zodat de ontstane mengelmoes van nog net wel, en net niet herkenbare citaten een nieuw blikveld op een oude geschiedenis opent.”

<sup>18</sup> “Het werd weer stil in de kamer; de gestalten die de zoon had opgeroepen vervaagden, trokken weg naar de geheime verten vanwaar zij gekomen waren.”

enumerating shared memories. The reader can feel their loss of connection through the three full pages it takes Quirien's mother to finish her enumeration, before she finally makes it explicit: "'Why did you go so far away,' she suddenly asked without transition, 'to that strange land, those strange people? Now you cannot return anymore'" (329).<sup>19</sup>

Pattynama has pointed out about this passage that Quirien's "displacement resembles those of Dutch Indies returnees in the Netherlands. They, too, remained silent about their previous experiences and often felt like strangers in their own land" ("Herinneringsliteratuur" 214).<sup>20</sup> Quirien's sense of displacement is expressed most saliently near the end of the story, in a lengthy passage that is cited in part below. As his mother leaves the room, Quirien silently starts to reflect on what she has said:

– Was she right? Was it true, did he no longer belong here?  
Did he belong to a few islands far away? To a volcano? To a bay? [...] To an Amazon, a ring – a small mosque made of palm wood – lacquered and gilded – from the inside – from the outside – crimson – red – dashing – balsamic – fragrant – an enchanting – blue tree? –  
– Did he from now on belong to a woman's jeweled comb and a hanged rebel? – Never ever to be reconciled – [...]  
– Or, or was it not so? –  
– Did he belong here after all? Also here – now and here and tomorrow – (330)<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> "'Waarom ben je zo ver weg gegaan,' vroeg zij ineens zonder overgang, 'naar dat vreemde land, die vreemde mensen? Nu kun je niet meer terugkomen.'"

<sup>20</sup> "Quirien's ontheemding doet denken aan die van de Indische repatrianten in Nederland. Ook zij bleven zwijgen over hun voorbije ervaringen en voelden zich vaak vreemdelingen in eigen land."

<sup>21</sup> "– Had zij gelijk? Was het zo, hoorde hij niet meer aan hier? Hoorde hij aan een paar eilanden ver weg? Aan een vulkaan? Aan een baai? [...] Eene Amazone, en een ring – een palmhouten moskeetje – gelakt en verguld – van binnen – van buiten – karmozijn – rode – zwierige – balsamiek – geurende – een betoverde – blauwe boom? – – Hoorde hij voortaan aan een juwelen vrouwenkam en een gehangen oproerling? – Nooit en te nimmer met elkaar te verzoenen – [...] – Of, of was het niet zo? – – Hoorde hij toch aan hier? Ook aan hier – nu en hier en morgen –"

The above-cited passage, in which Quirien's fleeting doubts about belonging are articulated, is not only one more example of storytelling through enumeration, but also offers perhaps the clearest demonstration of what Pattynama calls Dermoût's "pointillism" ("Totdat Constance kwam" 142). The passage consists not of full sentences, but rather of interrupted thoughts and incoherent musings, in which much space is left for silences in between that which is spoken, most explicitly through the abundant use of dashes.

By using this writing style, Dermoût presents Quirien's memory of the colony as something which cannot be fully expressed in words. Therefore, the passage suggests that his silence about the revolt is an indication not just of his unwillingness, but also of his felt inability to talk about it. As Quirien falls asleep, he places the truth of the situation beyond his own grasp, mumbling: "Only God knows" (330). In response, the story's closing sentence summons the echo of his mother's voice, reproaching him for using the Lord's name in vain: "'Don't say God all the time, Quirien,' whispered someone, so softly that he could not hear it anymore" (330).<sup>22</sup> Dermoût leaves her readers here with nothing at all: not even the summoning of God's truth is allowed, and the reproach against this summoning is not heard by the protagonist, though, paradoxically, focalized through him and therefore 'heard' by the reader nonetheless. What remains is a silence through which colonial history is implicitly felt by the reader, rather than explicitly expressed by the writer.

Social historian Laurie J. Sears explains this elusive presence of colonial history by referring to psychology. She argues that the theory of transgenerational haunting offers "a lens through which to view the colonial critique that is embedded in Dermoût's work"; Dermoût tells "stories about the failure to communicate. Mothers and sons, husbands and wives, servants and masters, all say less than they mean and mean more than they say" (22). What is felt through their meaningful silences can be understood as "phantoms or traumas" that "are encrypted in narrative and locked away from self-understanding by the characters that populate" her work (Sears 17-18). In *De juwelen haarkam*, colonial

<sup>22</sup> "'God mag het weten.' 'Zeg niet zo aldoor God, Quirien,' fluisterde iemand, zo zacht dat hij het niet meer verstond."

history appears as a tangible, haunting presence through the protagonist's refusal and inability to address it substantively.

As such, Dermoût's story can be read as a decolonizing fiction, that is, as an attempt to dismantle the lasting power attached to Ver Huell's colonial authority as the Moluccan revolt's central historical source. Dermoût reimagines him as an unreliable narrator: someone who both cannot and does not want to speak about what he has witnessed. Literary theorist Greta Olson identifies the introduction of an unreliable narrator as a common element of decolonizing literature: "By exploiting and subverting the hierarchically dependent communicative value of reliability, decolonizing fictions revise implicitly authoritarian narrative mores" (168). Through Quirien's silence, Dermoût destabilizes the authority of recorded colonial history, and as such "urges the reader to imagine alternative stories" (Olson 169).

Therefore, her story is empowering precisely because she does *not* give voice to this history, but on the contrary, because she grants it silence. In terms of affect theory, the silence which Dermoût summons is powerful because its affective resonance holds potentiality: affective phenomena "always encompass the virtual as well as the real, are about potentiality in the process of becoming" (Ahern 8). In the case of *De juwelen haarkam*, this potentiality concerns possible alternative ways of remembering this event of anticolonial resistance. The story releases the Moluccan revolt from Ver Huell's colonial voice. Thus, rather than re-narrating the event, Dermoût's approach to storytelling comes closer to a form of de-narration. By reimagining Ver Huell's dominant historical persona as the vulnerable and hesitant Quirien, Dermoût writes colonial history back into silence, opening it up to new potential articulations, by voices yet to appear. These voices could for instance belong to Moluccans or other postcolonial subjects. As such, Dermoût does not speak for anyone, but rather creates space for new potential voices to speak for themselves.

## **Conclusion: Beyond Silence as Silencing**

Much has been written about Dermoût's peculiar approach to storytelling, with its fixation on the hypnotic enumeration of objects, and its integration of silences in the speech of its protagonists. Whereas her approach has often been understood as a stylistic choice, my aim has been to understand it as a political choice, and more specifically, as a decolonizing writing strategy. *De juwelen haarkam* is an indirect retelling of the Moluccan revolt of 1817. The revolt is present in the story, and by extension, so is colonial history. However, it is present as a tangibly uneasy topic which the protagonist of the story, a Dutch returnee from the colony, at first refuses and then fails to speak about. The only moment in which Quirien does address the story explicitly is when he cites words written by the historical Ver Huell on which his character is based. This creates a stylistic discrepancy with the rest of the text that further escalates rather than resolves the story's sense of communication breakdown.

Through these storytelling techniques, Dermoût introduces colonial history in her story as a loud silence, something which is there, but which her protagonist would rather not talk about, or even cannot talk about when attempting to. As such, she allows colonial history to be felt in her story without enforcing her own perspective on it at any point. As such, she "does not succumb to the colonial tendencies of appropriation and paternalism" (Pattynama, "Totdat Constance Kwam" 143).<sup>23</sup> *De juwelen haarkam* thus is a decolonizing story because, through the silence of its protagonist, it writes the history of the Moluccan revolt away from colonial representation, and thereby opens up the possibility of imagining it differently. Therefore, the story is an intervention in the collective memory of the Dutch colonial past that foregoes speaking for the colonized. This colonial desire to speak for the colonized is a central tendency in Ver Huell's memoir, as a result of which his voice occupies space that could otherwise have been filled by Moluccan or other anti-colonial voices. By untangling this history from his dominating voice, Dermoût creates a silence that resonates with potentiality: it is an invitation for thus-far unheard voices to start speaking of their own accord.

<sup>23</sup> "houden zich ver van de koloniale tendens van toe-eigening en paternalisme."

What this analysis thus points out is that silence does not have to be the result of being silenced. In postcolonial theory, silence “has come to imply the absence of voice in political life and, as such, tends to be scholastically prescribed as the antithesis of political power and political agency” (Dingli and Cooke i). As a result, when silences are analyzed, if at all, “they are usually rendered synonymous with notions of defeat, lack, absence, or even as the end of politics, power, and agency” (1). However, in Dermoût’s story, silence is not presented as this disempowering condition that is imposed upon someone. Instead, Dermoût’s use of silence is empowering: it is a way to provide expression to events that are too complex to put into words. Where words reach their limit, silence thus emerges as an alternative form of articulation.

Within the realms of cultural theory and activism, this realization provides nuance to the logocentric, binary opposition that is often assumed between voice-as-power and silence-as-powerlessness. In a world that is oversaturated by the spoken and written word, it can be refreshing to read between the lines and search for silence. In a logic of empowerment obsessed with distributing voices to the voiceless, it can be a relief to realize that silence is expressive too, just in ways that are less familiar. Most importantly, accepting silence as a form of articulation takes away the pressure to speak ever louder and clearer. Perhaps the problem was never the ability to speak, but the ability to listen.

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## **Biography**

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