

NOVELS AS ETHNOGRAPHIES:
THE CHALLENGE FOR THE ANTHROPOLOGIST AS READER

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Introduction

It can be taken as axiomatic that in one way or another the novel was, and is always, a commentary on the contemporary world of the intended reader.² This is true even when it is most seemingly remote from that world. Where the visibility of this commentary finds its most palpable form, however, is in the realist novel, the focus of this article, which directly challenges the reader to contrast what she knows directly, her experience, with the representation in the novel, requiring of her an extension of intellectual sympathy from her known world to that which is beyond the immediate boundaries of her experience.

When readers take up a novel written some time in the past, this task of contrasting experiences and values still continues, but it is harder, because they have to work to understand what was the implicit moral and intellectual consciousness of the first intended readers to which the novelist was making implicit reference. The conversation between readers and the novel thus takes on an added dimension, since the movement of interpreting and evaluating requires an initial appreciation of the intellectual structuring of the writer's world before it can engage with the individual arguments and insights of the particular novel being read. This to-ing and fro-ing in the reader's interpretive endeavour should sound familiar to anthropologists: it is, after all, how they follow their metier when they confront experiences 'on their surface enigmatical', as Geertz (1973: 5) puts it.

The similarity is not coincidental. Literary critics who write to identify how particular works embody 'the structure of feeling', in Raymond Williams' phrase (Williams 1965: 64, cf. Williams 1979: 159), of a time and a place are in fact working anthropologically. Whether they realize it or not, in offering their readers an account of how, through their novels, writers imagine and position themselves in their own societies, they have become ethnographers,

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² Those who may still have lingering doubts about this, or who subscribe to a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', should read Harry E. Shaw's magisterial but sometimes difficult *Narrating Reality* (1999), in which he sets out the contemporary debates on the issue. In his analysis of the novels of Austen, Scott and Eliot he convincingly demonstrates how readers engage dialogically with the novels in seeking to clarify their own positions: 'construing the world', as he puts it (Shaw 1999: 266). See also Stierle (1980).

albeit of a special kind, doing the job of explaining one intellectual world to another. Anthropologists perform the identical task using other materials: they observe the practices of everyday life, the rituals and performances of a community, and its institutional frameworks. And then they, too, try systematically to explain the rationality of what they have seen and heard to readers unfamiliar with that world. In the past they confined their observations to non-literate societies, but the 'field' of their research has changed over the last hundred years. 'Primitive', 'non-literate', 'race' and 'tribe' are no longer useful categories; furthermore, the advance of technology has meant that not only have the anthropologists' tools changed, so have the material dimensions of social life to which they need to pay attention: smart phones ubiquitously cover the globe.

In all this redirecting and refocusing of the anthropologist's gaze, too little, it seems to me, has been made of the potential of the novel as a now near-universal form; yet, as literary criticism has demonstrated, this is a resource that, interpreted carefully and critically, can yield valuable insights, equal, say, to the analysis of myth which proved so fruitful in the past.

In particular, with respect to novels written about societies with which anthropologists have become familiar through long research and residence, it is they, from their privileged positions, even more than literary critics, who should be drawing out for us the implicit understandings and interpretations of social life of which the novels are expressions.

Writing in the nineteenth century about what she hoped her novels would do, George Eliot stated that she wanted to extend the range of the reader's experience by introducing characters, situations and social classes with which the reader might be insufficiently familiar. The same wish indirectly to educate and inform and, in some cases, titillate the reader frequently seems to be the intention of non-indigenous, outsider novelists, as I shall call them, who deliberately take as their focus 'other' societies. And, as we shall see, even when indigenous, insider novelists are writing for readers in their own societies, as a novel-writing tradition develops, the evolution of their intentions follows the same trajectory as their outsider predecessors: a movement which begins with wanting to depict a range of communities and intellectual universes at the periphery of their readers' experience and moves towards an increasingly refined close analysis of those minds, which are seemingly

familiar to their readers but are explored at depth in order to surprise the reader into greater self-consciousness.

It is these novels, which represent what are, to the reader, worlds still relatively foreign, that I shall be confining myself to. In the first place, however, some ground-clearing is called for. We need to recognize that these novels go about their modes of representation in different ways depending on who the intended readers of the texts are taken to be, but even before we consider this matter, we have to clarify more sharply what it is of an ethnographic nature that the anthropologist, as a special category of reader, hopes to obtain from her reading, while stressing that it is not, on the whole, the material details of life-styles that are at issue here.

It seems possible to condense what anthropologists might reasonably expect down to three issues, each of which is open to more discussion, modification and argument than I have the space for here, but which in their schematic form will at least indicate my general position. First, the reader expects to be fully introduced to the moral universe of the characters of a novel: that is, she expects to be informed of the set of values, norms and customary practices of those characters who must be seen to be acting under the constraints of accepted social conventions, especially when the focus of the narrative is to explore the revolt against those constraints. Unless the reader feels confident that this moral universe has been adequately described in order to frame and make comprehensible the actions of the characters – and this is what verisimilitude is all about – then the novel is inevitably going to be judged to be flawed.

A second requirement is that the action of a novel be dependent on an awareness of change. At one level this can simply be a change brought about by a collision between characters who are forced to confront a difference between themselves and others in the social environment. At another level, not separate from the first, and indeed very frequently the motor or cause of it, this change in the environment is the product of large historical events, socio-economic developments or dramatically altered material circumstances. It is the credible response of the characters to change in the context of the moral universes under which they operate, and with which the reader needs to be conversant, that makes the novel open to appropriation by the reader, making it possible for it to be taken up into her own intellectual and moral discourses.

And finally – perhaps the most tendentious of the three points – the reader must be satisfied that, however eccentric and idiosyncratic the actions of the novel are and however finitely the individual temperaments have been described, the characters are representative of

a world, a collectivity of a kind, and not simply of themselves. Now I am aware that a statement like this harks back to what some would argue is the rather tired Hegelian category of the universal-particular. And I am also aware of the seeming paradox that the realist novel goes out of its way to define itself as individual rather than typical against the grand narratives of the epic and classical drama. Nonetheless, I want to insist that if a novel is to make sense to the reader to the extent that it moves significantly past the point of being entertainment and amusement, then the characters have to assume, in the reader's grasp of them, a dimension which gives them a representative status, at least at some points in the novel.³ As a rider to that I would push the argument further by saying that one purpose of criticism of the novel, though it is not the only one, must be to demonstrate the representativeness or otherwise of the characters. This would seem to me to be simply the uncontroversial demand that we judge any artistic creation by whether or not it succeeds in what it sets out to achieve.⁴ There may appear to be a circularity here: I am defining a good novel in terms of its representative function and then saying that if it fails to fulfil its function it is not a good novel; but then my argument is that, in terms of intrinsic form and its subsequent history, this function is indeed what distinguishes the novel from other literary forms.

To recap: anthropologists as readers want to see a convincing correspondence between their knowledge of the world and the reality of the novel which should comprise a moral and intellectual universe sufficiently explicated and explained (Ricoeur 1981: 157-64) to render comprehensible the dilemmas faced, the resolutions made and the actions performed by characters in the text. We need now to consider how writers satisfy their readers' demands.

Still restricting ourselves to those novels written more or less explicitly to inform the reader of what it means for individuals to be fully themselves in situations and contexts which at first sight may perplex, or at least be unfamiliar to the reader – and discounting for the moment how individual readers differ in time and space from a writer's ideal – we can

³ Nussbaum (1995: 70-2) deals briefly but cogently with the issue of whether, through the depiction of individual character, we can come to an understanding of a class or group.

⁴ On this point Booth (1987: 43), commenting on Henry James's criticisms of Flaubert for having written about uninteresting characters such as Madame Bovary, notes that James seems to have forgotten his own principle of allowing a novelist to write about what she/he wishes. 'We must grant the writer his *donnée*', says James, but then criticises Flaubert. I may be appearing to repeat James' error here, but in fact my point is not that there are some classes of people or societies which are intrinsically unsuitable for representation in the novel, but simply that the novel, certainly the realist novel, is predicated on a contract of reading, implicitly agreed upon by writer and reader, that there is a correspondence, more or less close, between the reality known to the reader and the *mise-en-scène* of the novel.

usefully distinguish three types of novel. First, there are those written by observers external to the social environment, which has been chosen as the critical focus of the novel, for the benefit of readers who are equally outsiders. Second are those written by writers who are in some sense participants or members of the social environment they describe, but who also write for outsiders. Finally, some novels are written by writers for their peers or fellow insiders. In relation to each of these categories, as we might expect, writers make different assumptions, partly with respect to the prior knowledge which their readers bring to the appreciation of the material and cultural environment of the novel. However, far more significant for our analysis here, they make assumptions in understanding the social demands made on individual characters in terms of inter-personal relationships controlled by structures of kinship, power or exchange. Decisions regarding the necessary framing of the actions of the novel inevitably also affect the degree to which the conflict or collision or dynamic of the novel, its explicandum, can be properly conveyed to the reader. Put another way, if the writer feels that her readers are more or less ignorant of the universe she intends to reveal to them, this inhibits her capacity to delve into the sophisticated nuances of dramatic situation, the details of which would be lost on the reader.⁵

The reader's assumed universe enters into consideration at another level too, since not only does the novelist need to be aware of the reader's potential ignorance, she also has to grapple with the assumptions which the reader may be bringing from her own moral universe. When readers and writers inhabit the same universe as the characters in the novel, then the problems are relatively minor, and the text can afford to indulge in a variety of sophisticated linguistic and literary devices ranging from highly wrought metaphorical usage to finely calculated irony and allusively complex reference.⁶ This last issue introduces the final point we need to note in terms of the crucial relationship between readers and writers. In all cases the novel, written and read, derives from a textual tradition, a knowledge of which the writer assumes that readers bring to their reading. That is, the writer assumes an awareness of different kinds of story-telling tied to one or other of the many such existing within any one

⁵ This question of what significance one should attach to notions of the ideal reader (Booth 1987: 140; Holub 1984; Jauss 1982: 20-45) lies at the heart of reception theory. Suleiman (1980) provides a useful summary.

⁶ The Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, very much aware of this issue, made a deliberate decision to abandon ignorant readers to their own devices and consequently, rather than write in English for Anglophone readers who would need continual explanations of linguistic and cultural references in the text, he has made a point of writing in Gikuyu (Ngugi 1985). This has consequently meant that when his novels are translated into English his readers have to work hard to pick up the necessary cues, as reviewers of his novel *Wizard of the Crow* have noted (Van der Vlies: 2006, Gurnah: 2007).

community of readers and listeners. Thus a reader and listener are assumed to have an ability to evaluate the elements in the story-telling and the overall composition which those elements are working to construct.⁷ In other words, a knowledge of literary conventions is taken for granted. As we know, things can go remarkably wrong when the conventions are misunderstood. A well-known instance of this occurs when Laura Bohannon's native audience fails to grasp the conventions of Elizabethan revenge drama, as described in her article, 'Shakespeare in the Bush' (1966); the same misunderstanding or category mistake underlies the humour of James Thurber's story, *The Macbeth Murder Mystery*.

Whatever construction or reading we place upon the tale the novel tells, then, these elementary rules of reading need constantly to be at the forefront of our critical appreciation: what is being assumed of me as a reader, and are those assumptions necessary for my understanding of the text? The anthropological reader, used as she is to distancing herself or bracketing out pre-conceptions and assumptions in order to move closer to the cultural universe of others, is, in this respect, a privileged reader, but also a more discriminating one.

What we now need to attend to more closely is precisely how that discrimination should come into play with respect to the three types of novel in question.

The outsider's novel written for outsiders

Within the western tradition and, as far as I am aware, in the Arabic and Chinese traditions too there has always been a travel literature recounting the wonders and resources of a world beyond the immediate experience of the reader. In most cases the intention of the writer – Ibn Battutah, Ma Huan or Mendes Pinto – has been to provide information about the potential advantages and perils of engaging these distant other worlds in trade. In Europe from about the sixteenth century onwards, roughly from the period of Montaigne's famous essay on cannibals, in which he avails himself of travellers' chronicles, an additional motif enters into the text – that of deliberately using the strangeness of the other to comment on the social conventions of contemporary European society. This tendency reaches its peak in Europe in the vogue for Chinoiserie and the setting of literary texts and dramas in exotic foreign locations or with foreign observers as the principal characters: think of Dryden's *Aurangzeb*

⁷ In an article on Conrad in which the question of the 'writing community' is discussed in full, Mulhern convincingly demonstrates how it was only when, after a long period of writer's block, Conrad settled on whom he took to be the listeners of his, and Marlow's, narrative that he was able to write fluently again (Mulhern 2006: 63-4). See also note 17 below.

(1675), Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721) or Diderot's *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (1772).

This last example, however, marks the end of this literary trope, which is gradually superseded by the collective ambitions of Enlightenment thinkers to amass quantities of empirically observed facts and submit them to the prism of rational analysis and thence to systematic classification (Zhang 1988). Montesquieu's own *L'Esprit des Lois* (1748) is sometimes singled out (Evans-Pritchard 1981: 3-12) as a significant turning point in this respect, and for anthropologists perhaps the best known text of this kind is Degérando's *Considerations* (1800). From then on throughout the nineteenth century, as we know, the scientific impulse fuelled by social evolutionism and encouraged by post-Napoleonic European colonial expansion (and American curiosity about its native populations) leads to intense, almost feverish efforts to record as accurately as possible the 'manners and customs' of non-European societies. Now, we know from the work of Raymond Schwab (1950) and Edward Said (1978) that much of that proto-ethnographic description was predicated on colonial assumptions and projects tied up in the exercise of power and authority (Schwab 1950: 41). While acknowledging that point, however – and bearing in mind the well-founded criticism of some of Said's critics, such as Irwin (2006) and Clifford (1988: 255-76) – we should not ignore the strenuous efforts of those who, though they may have been caught up in the perspectival *Zeitgeist* of the time, were both sympathetic and respectful, almost reverential, towards the dignity of the non-European traditions they encountered, arduously and meticulously recording what they observed in the belief that it also represented great human achievements. In the context of my own field, the Indonesian-Malay world, one thinks immediately of men like Stamford Raffles, William Marsden and John Crawfurd,⁸ not omitting Dutch scholars such as P.J. Veth, F. Junghuhn, C. Snouck Hurgronje and others of whom E.M. Beekman (1996) has written extensively.

When the first novels adopting this new colonial perspective appear towards the end of the nineteenth century, they no longer share the ambitions of their seventeenth-century predecessors. Instead, they set out with three aims in mind, which jostle for primacy according to the authors' imagining of their readers. Although the weave of the pattern and the colour contrasts change over the course of a century or so, each of these three skeins or strands is clearly visible. The first of these is the plot of adventure and intrigue, increasingly

⁸ For a superb, detailed account of the thinking of British scholar administrators in the Malay Archipelago, see Maier (1988).

important throughout the nineteenth century, not only in popular literature and melodrama, the theatrical genre of the period, but also in the major novelists: what is Dickens if not melodramatic? Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century the vehicle for such tales of intrigue was often the historical novel, but thereafter we see the rise of the detective novel, such as Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, and the colonial novel, the latter perhaps best summed up in the oeuvre of Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling. It is the description of dramatic actions, confrontations and episodic struggles in which the writers excel and into the excitement of which they draw their readers (Green 1980). At the same time, there is a desire on the part of writers to demonstrate their credentials as observers, a desire which coincides with the structural need to make their plots realistically credible. This leads to the second strand of the textual weave: the specific placing of local detail as it relates to both the physical environment – the humid dripping tropical jungle and the strangely perfumed cosmopolitan bazaars of the towns – and the social relationships that bind the native population together in a complex web of family ties, political obligations and commercial transactions. Again, we can think of Kipling here.

Contemporaneously, political and economic developments are independently leading to a greater detailed knowledge of other cultures and climes, which, through a feed-back loop, creates a thirst for more and more detail, which can now be supplied not only through the written text and oral accounts, but also increasingly through photography and then film. Consequently, relieved of the need to provide substantial descriptive detail, the formal development of the novel as a genre is pushing writers much more towards the exploration of the interiority of their characters. And this element of psychological exploration, the third of our strands, also finds expression in novels set in foreign locations, where the pressures of the local circumstances lead to the highlighting and accentuation of moral dilemmas and passionate excesses. Here, of course, one thinks primarily of Conrad and, from a later date, Graham Greene.

This heuristic reference to three compositional strands in the structuring of the novel should not, however, lead us to suppose that writers were consciously combining these elements in a judicious mixture as their own preferences or the expectations of their readers required. It was not as mechanical as that, and the novelists were all, I think, aiming at higher seriousness as well as entertainment in their novels and short stories. Malinowski once said that he wanted to be the Conrad of anthropology in contrast to Rivers as its Rider Haggard. At one time I thought that this statement implied a literary evaluation of Conrad and Haggard by Malinowski, with the former being seen as the intellectual superior, but I now think that

perhaps Malinowski was alluding first to the issue of nationality – he was like Conrad a Pole – and, secondly, simply to a historical evolution of form: Conrad was using the same mix of elements but taking greater pains to explore the psychology of Europeans facing difficult moral choices in theatrically charged exotic locations.

How, then, should anthropologists be reading these novels? What weight should we be ascribing to the different intentions of the writers and the balance between the elements in those passages in the narrative where we can distinguish them? My own reading experience leads me to think that in fact, taken as accounts of non-European societies, the novels are on the whole unreliable. In the first place the writer, despite a superficial impressionistic facility, simply lacks the knowledge of the indigenous society which he – or occasionally she – purports to describe. At a very elementary level – and this should resonate with anthropologists in the Malinowskian tradition who stresses intimacy with the language as the *sine qua non* of access to native society – the writer does not have the command of the language which would allow him to understand native institutions.

There are exceptions. British administrators like Clifford in the Malay Archipelago did have that facility and understood the institutions thoroughly. His qualities were readily acknowledged by his friend Conrad, but, as the latter implied, this capacity to explain that society was never demonstrated in Clifford's short stories and novels. It is easy to account for this deficiency as a lack of creative genius – whatever the socio-historical conditions conducive to the rise of the realist novel in the 19th century, not all novelists are Flaubert, as Sartre, I think it is, points out – but there is more to it than that. Understanding what that is can help us to see why later external observer novelists, however perceptive, often fail to represent native society plausibly. Clifford's mind was firmly moulded according to the *mentalité* of early twentieth-century paternalistic colonialism: he was not simply sympathetically drawn to native Malay society, but emotionally and psychologically identified himself with it. Going out to Malaya at an early age, he had for years lived side by side with Malays and had had relatively little contact with Europeans. Understandably, the experience had led him to recognize Malay values of friendship and kinship and take them into himself. At the same time, he recognized his obligations to the whole colonial mission of social improvement, raising standards of welfare, creating conditions for a better quality of life, and committing himself to those with whom he was charged. The impediment to that improvement frequently lay, in his opinion, with the abuse of power exercised by the native ruling elites, and it was right that the colonial authorities should intervene to curb that abuse. On the other hand, it was also apparent to him that the restructuring of native society to

conform to western models would also destroy the pristine innocence of native society as he had understood and experienced it. It is these twin themes that control his descriptions and presentations: writing short stories for his peers in *Blackwood's Magazine* or novels for the wider public, he lingers over the romance of native society and the descriptions of the landscape which are its correlative. At the same time, however, he spells out warnings about both the menaces internal to that society in despotic rulers and chiefs and, paradoxically, what can go wrong if native society is encouraged to abandon its institutions in the interests of progress.⁹

The same paradoxical thinking is to be seen in the great Dutch colonial novel *Max Havelaar* (1865), which deserves to be better known outside the Netherlands than it is. Like Clifford, Multatuli, the pseudonym adopted by the Dutchman E. Douwes Dekker, had an intimate knowledge of native society: in general, it would seem, because of their greater dispersal and less frequent contact with fellow Europeans, Dutch colonial officials were more conversant than their British counterparts in India with native society. Douwes Dekker was accordingly torn between his paternalistic obligations to that society and his waveringly hesitant view of it as a primitive Arcadia, as is strikingly evident in a famous episode in the novel describing the young love of two villagers, Saidjah and Adinda. Douwes Dekker, less able than Clifford to contain his frustration at the direction of official government policy, resigned in protest at the failure of the Governor-General to act against abuse, and *Max Havelaar* is his famous account of the affair.

For all their seeming knowledge of native society, then, these novels are not to be read for the profundity of their interpretations of native society, and we misread them if we think of them in this way. What, however, we can read them for is their representations of colonial society. Reading Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934), for example, we find descriptions of the expatriate community which, despite our reservations about those who are more caricature than character, convey to the reader vivid impressions of an environment which the reader fully recognizes but, without the experience, does not know directly. It is the same tropical expatriate society that Somerset Maugham describes so brilliantly in his Malay stories: a society comprising a mixture of misfits and idealists, all in their way eccentric and behaving oddly, but in a manner eerily consonant with the climate, with nature, and with the imaginary of primitive culture still lingering in the European mind as a vestige of nineteenth-century

⁹ A lot has been written about Clifford, who continues to fascinate scholars of colonial Malaya. For a recent comment on his understanding of Malay society, see Muhammad (1986: 138-46).

evolutionist ideas. Contemporary Dutch novels (known as *Indisch* novels, a term which refers specifically to the expatriate society of the Dutch East Indies) evoke that same sense of colonial life-style corrupted by the relentless dripping influence of oriental ways of being.¹⁰ We find this sardonically evoked in the marvellous novels of P.A. Daum, an admirer of Zola, but its best known example is probably Couperus' *De Stille Kracht* (1906), for the nearest contemporary equivalent of which in English we have to turn to Henry James' elaborate ghost stories.

Sometimes, however, these colonial novelists do turn to the native society which lies outside the world of the servants and sutlers of the colonial regime and try to represent individuals in their own context. The enterprise now strikes us as arrogant in its facile assumption of how native life-styles can so quickly and easily be intellectually appropriated, a reflection of ours that adds an entirely proper dimension to our contemporary reading. Thus we baulk at Leonard Woolf's portrayal of Sinhalese peasants in *The Village in the Jungle* (1913), however sympathetically the characters are portrayed and however correct the detail. These novels are, at least to anthropological readers, simply not credible. Augusta de Wit's *Orpheus in the Village* (*Orpheus in de Dessa*, 1903), about a flute-playing young buffalo-herder, falls into that same category. It was popular in its time and remained so for several decades because it met the expectations of those readers who still cherished the romantic idyll, one which had now been displaced from rural Europe to the tropics. We read these works too for the representative articulation of appropriations by European writers of the colonial other, not for insights into the complexity of inter-personal relationships. Even a novel like Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, written later (1938), where there is, as in *Burmese Days*, an attempt to pair a description of expatriate society with native society – though with greater emphasis on a singular character, the eponymous Mister Johnson – the anthropological reader now finds herself squirming uneasily at the grossness of the depictions.

The way in which that novel is read deserves more comment than I have space for here, but it is worth noting that not only was it, at least until recently, a book recommended as good reading to sixth formers, but it continued to be reprinted in the Penguin Modern Classics series, and in 1997 was again re-issued with a new sympathetic introduction by Tom William Boyd. (.) This time, it is not the strength of the romantic idyll which the alert reader

¹⁰ Maier (2004) has written very perceptively about these *Indisch* novels and shown the evolution of the form from the early twentieth century to the publication in 2002 of Hella Haasse's much acclaimed novel *Sleuteloog*. See also Termorshuizen (1990).

notices, but the hardening trope of the half-educated native, the pernicious trickster-villain, caricature again. Even when obviously comic and satirical, it is insufficiently contextualised for the innocent reader to place the character and therefore measure the appropriate critical distance from which to make a proper judgement.

Only two novels in this category make what seems to me a serious appeal to the reader to reflect self-critically, and neither is by a writer claiming special knowledge of native languages or long years of residence. The first is E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, about which I have written elsewhere (Watson 1995) and which I shall only comment on here to note that, in the combination of those three strands which constitute for readers the required characteristics of the colonial and post-colonial novel, in Forster's case the dominant strand is that exploration of inter-personal relations which he inherited from the literary conventions of the novel of manners. The description of expatriate society is there, as is something of the colour of the Indian environment, but his is above all a novel of misunderstanding and the development of self-knowledge. Precisely for that reason, then, it makes different intellectual demands on the reader than the other novels (vide Rapport 1994). In *A Passage to India* one is not expected simply to accept native characters but to puzzle over them.¹¹

The other novel I have in mind is Vargas Llosa's *El Hablador* (*The Story-Teller*; 1987, 1989). This is not so much a colonial novel, though it clearly has affinities with one and certainly falls easily into the category of post-colonial. It was written in 1980 and takes as its subject the plight of a native Andean Amazon ethnic group, the Machiguengas, as filtered doubly through the consciousness of the narrator, a Peruvian writer, and the shadowy figure of a Jewish Peruvian intellectual friend of his who becomes, it seems, a native story-teller. The appeal of the novel, one that immediately endears it to the anthropological reader impatient with the pretensions of so many other novels, lies in exactly that same candid disclaimer of specialist knowledge that Forster makes explicit Forster.¹² Neither he nor Llosa

¹¹ An article by Frank Kermode (2007) relying on his research among Forster's papers in King's College Cambridge shows how perceptively Forster actually drew upon his personal experience of India, relatively brief though it was, and of his Indian friends for his fictional representations.

¹² In one of the best works I know written by a novelist describing the relationship between reality and his fiction, Llosa writes specifically: 'I also have had great difficulty writing about Indian characters in my own novels because I am a realistic writer in the sense I write out of personal experience. My personal experience of the Indian worlds is limited because, for one thing, I do not speak the Indian languages. I remember in writing *The Greenhouse*, I wanted to have an Indian character, a primitive man from a small tribe in the Amazon region, as the central figure in the novel. I tried hard to invent this character from within in order to show the reader his subjectivity, how he had assimilated some kinds of experiences with the white world. But I could not do it. It was totally impossible for me to invent a persuasive description of a man who was so far away from me from a cultural point of view, a man who had, not a rational, but a magical relationship with the world. I felt I was

know the native society they describe in any specialist way, but they attempt to grasp it sympathetically and imaginatively, just as the anthropologist in the field tries to do, and not simply render it comprehensible, but turn it into the reader's dialectical interlocutor. Both approach the subject obliquely, and both are intensely committed to exploring technically the narrative conventions of the genre they employ. Forster offers us the ruminations of Professor Godbole and the colour and spectacle of the festival of light and the Hindu temples; Llosa intersperses his narrative with Machiguenga creation myths. And both writers conclude with reflections indirectly articulated by their narrators. For Forster it is the recognition of the present difficulty of full understanding between two men from different cultural milieux who are striving for a union of spirit, and for whom is held out the promise of it in the future. For Llosa it is the sad acknowledgement that a way of life cannot and perhaps should not be preserved if the struggle for it demands so much suffering. In both cases these seem to me to be opinions, the supporting logic of which is embedded in the narratives of the novel, which compel the anthropological reader to engage, giving or withholding assent in exactly the way in which a good ethnographic text encourages the reader to confer or withhold assent to its propositions. And it is precisely this sort of engagement and this sort of text that Rorty (1989) endorses as an appropriate human – read 'anthropological' – stance.

These externally observed accounts are, then, predicated on calculated notions of what the readers of the novels already know and what they anticipate learning. Any critical view of them needs to begin by formulating what these assumptions are and how they are differently articulated from period to period and from writer to writer, although they share broad commonalities of structure and convention. Working as an anthropological reader with these novels for the most part requires a willingness to evaluate the accounts of native society not as transparent ethnographic descriptions but as a frame through which to view the historical evolution of a colonial and post-colonial mentality. By contrast the internal observer writing for the external reader can be seen to challenge that mentality while at the same time bringing it into sharper focus by so doing.

making a caricature of this character and finally decided to describe him through intermediaries, through characters whom I was able to divine and to perceive' (Llosa 1991: 19; see also p. 79). Writing as the narrator in *The Storyteller*, he makes a similar point about '... the difficulty of inventing in Spanish and within a logically consistent intellectual framework, a literary form that would suggest, with any reasonable degree of credibility [*verosimilmente* in the original], how a primitive man with a magico-religious mentality would go about telling a story. All my attempts [to write about the storyteller] led each time to the impasse of style that struck me as glaringly false [*tan obviamente fraudulento* in the original], as implausible as the various ways in which philosophers and novelists of the Enlightenment had put words into the mouths of their exotic characters in the eighteenth century, when the theme of the "noble savage" was fashionable in Europe' (1989: 158).

The insider's novel for the outsider reader

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was explicitly written to this end. Achebe declared that he was spurred to write the novel after a reading of Cary's *Mr Johnson*, which he desired to rebut (Innes 1990). He wanted to correct the distortions and misrepresentations of native society which he felt Cary's readers were being encouraged simply to accept without question. Consequently, Achebe's intended readers were both those for whom Cary had written directly and those to whose attention the novel had been subsequently been brought – scholars of English like Achebe himself, as well as the lay reader and generations of schoolchildren. Given that this, explicitly, is his readership, Achebe's task was to familiarise readers with, or at least make sympathetically understandable to them, the motivations and values which determine the actions of the community, opening up the possibility of an alternative interpretation to that offered by Cary. And that sympathetic rendering of the community, by interpreting the actions and characters of the novel, of necessity impels him to the description of ethnographic detail, knowledge of which he cannot assume is known to the reader. Good novelist as he is, however, he is alert to how easily that provision of detail can tip over into otiose didacticism, a pitfall he carefully avoids, making the reader work for the knowledge by not translating terms and by compelling her to make imaginative leaps to understand the significance of customary ways of behaving.

The anthropological reader is better disposed to accept such an account of native society rather than those discussed in the category of external observer novels not only because the writing is better informed, but because of the subtlety of the representation and the contextualization of the events. However, no matter how well informed the writer, the anthropologist, so used to encountering the knowledgeable but not always reliable, interlocutor in the field, will inevitably respond, at least initially, to the assertions of any individual indigenous novelist, too, with a measure of questioning and doubt. In the case of *Things Fall Apart*, for example, a sceptic might want to query the historical reconstruction of a native pre-colonial mentality which Achebe imagines. Okonkwo, the central character, is a powerful tragic figure, but how reliable is the portrayal of the flawed and baffled hero? On what basis has Achebe delved into his interiority and imputed those ambitions and hubristic actions to him? Is he not a mythical rather than a realist protagonist? And, in terms of the historical context, is the conceptual isolation of the community from economic, political and cultural movements of the time credible, given what we know of the process of change that was occurring at that period? These are questions which a critical reading should explore, but

their relevance for our immediate purposes here is to demonstrate how they are implicitly brought to the reader's attention precisely because an argument, an interpretation, is required for the intelligent appropriation of this kind of novel.

In this respect, *Things Fall Apart* exemplifies how the imagining and planning of an explicitly ethnographic novel working hard to convince the reader of its documentary accuracy and the presentation of its argument can be consciously influenced by whom the writer sees as his or her readership. The less informed the reader, the greater the need to insert the appropriate contextual stage directions.

Amit Chaudhuri, however, has called into doubt how significant the issue of the intended reader really is (2006). Indicating his frustration at the question often put to him on public occasions about whom he is writing for, he suggests the question is illegitimate because it presupposes that there is a discrete audience in mind, an educated and sophisticated middle-class European reader, for example, for whom he is tailoring his description, whereas in fact audiences do not exist in such neatly partitioned categories. I think there is something disingenuous in what he says here, for two reasons. First, it was certainly the case that until relatively recently Anglophone writers – indeed all native writers writing in European languages in a colonial or immediate post-colonial context – were writing for those European readers who were drawn to portrayals of colonial and ex-colonial social environments, and only in some contexts did they include their own educated peers. Secondly, the conventions of the novel to which the Anglophone writers subscribe do assume a readership accustomed to following certain cues towards interpretation that are only available to those educated within certain reading traditions. This, of course, is not to circumscribe a category by a national culture so much as by a common globally available style of education.

Chaudhuri himself points to Nirad Chaudhuri as deliberately addressing himself to a western reader, but he implies that this is something of an exception. However, one could equally have referred to Mulk Raj Anand or R.K. Narayan. Anand's great naturalist novels, *Coolie* (1936) and *Untouchable* (1935), were clearly intended for non-Indian readers unaware of the material circumstances in which the poorest in Indian society lived: the descriptions in the novels are designed to enlighten them. Familiarization again. It may well be that, as I have taken to be the case with *Things Fall Apart*, in ascribing a certain psychology to his central characters he makes some unacceptable leaps, but there is a plausibility in the contextualization which the anthropological reader is grateful for. Narayan's readership, too, is non-Indian. However, it is noticeable that his attention to environmental detail is not so obtrusive. We can, I think, attribute the change to his being a generation away from Mulk Raj

Anand, at least as far as his major novels are concerned, since the historical evolution of the form over a relatively short time can affect the writer's choice of subject. Also, however, as described above, an awareness of the increasing sophistication and knowledgeable understanding of the non-native reader requires less explicit material description and a greater intensity in the exploration of character, something which Amit Chaudhuri himself, along with his fellow (Indian) writers, now exploit to the full.

Curiously, the many indigenous Anglophone Caribbean, African and Indian writers, as well as perhaps their Francophone counterparts in Africa and the Caribbean, are not matched by a corresponding number of Anglophone writers in Malaya – or at least not until very recently – nor by Dutch language writers in Indonesia (the Dutch East Indies of the colonial period).¹³ There is, however, one important exception here over which it is worth pausing, Suwarsih Djojopoespito's fine novel *Buiten Het Gareel* (*Out of the Harness*), unfortunately not yet translated into English. The history of the publication of this autobiographical novel in the Netherlands in 1941 with the support of the Dutch writer and intellectual Edgar du Perron is familiar to specialists of Indonesian literature, and sufficient has been written about it to make it unnecessary to go into detail here.¹⁴ For our purposes, several critical points merit a brief mention. There is almost a complete absence of European characters in the book; indeed, the only one portrayed, besides the officers of the Political Intelligence Service, is Du Perron himself, and even he appears only in a relatively insignificant episode. The preoccupation of the novel is the depiction of the universe of the Dutch-educated political elite which is heavily committed to the nationalist movement for independence and works in the fields of education, journalism and social reform. Perhaps because it leans so heavily on autobiographical conventions – largely as a result of Du Perron's influence – rather than on conventions of the contemporary realist novel, there is only a perfunctory attempt to construct a central intrigue around which the action of the novel can be plotted. Instead, the

¹³ Good historical reasons account for this in terms of the different histories and educational policies of colonial governments. Novels in Malaya and the Dutch East Indies were certainly written and read by the native populations, but they were written in the regional vernaculars, and very different assumptions were made of the readers in terms not only of prior knowledge but also of the conventions that framed the narratives in general. Critical questions relating to the audience were also asked of the writers by their peers, as, I suspect, *pace* Chaudhuri's scepticism, they were also being asked contemporaneously (circa 1925) of Indian vernacular writers such as Bibhutibhushan Banerjee (Ghosh 1976). For the anthropological reader, as we shall discuss below, there is more intrinsic interest in these novels in the vernacular than in those so obviously written for outsiders, since she is after all curious about common assumptions to which the former implicitly refer.

¹⁴ For a review of some of the literature on the novel and an account of how surprisingly proto-feminist it is in the Indonesian context, see Watson (2009).

description follows an episodic chronology over the course of two years, during which the tensions arising in the intellectual and social milieu of the principal characters are vividly rendered. A good knowledge of contemporary circumstances is assumed in the reader, and indeed there is some ambiguity about whom the novel is appealing to. Despite its publication in the Netherlands, it would seem to be her Dutch-educated peers that Suwarsih is addressing, but there was also a wide potential readership among the Dutch population domiciled in the Indies who would have been potential readers.¹⁵

There are, then, degrees of accommodation which native writers make to their non-native readers. Furthermore, in the context of not being entirely certain who the readers are or are going to be, one can accept the justice of Chaudhuri's statement, certainly as it applies to recent post-Rushdie literature, that the question of the readership is not always significant in determining either the way in which the writer consciously decides to shape her material or to make an interpretative argument. Nonetheless, it remains true that many writers have deliberately chosen to write for the sophisticated but ignorant non-native reader. How quickly the anthropological reader will be able to make discriminating evaluations relating to the nature of informative authorial interventions in such texts will inevitably depend on the extent of the critical education and anthropological learning she brings to the reading.¹⁶ These factors will also, of course, determine her response to the final and potentially most rewarding of the fictions she has access to: the novels written by writers in the vernacular for their own linguistic and social communities. These works, when they have a serious purpose, are not written simply for entertainment or the confirmation of a community's unique linguistic identity in the world, but with the deliberate intention of engaging their readers in debate. 'Defamiliarizing' them would be one term for it, jolting them out of their unreflective

¹⁵ It was republished twice after the war, and the second edition published in 1949 seems to have circulated among the Dutch population still resident in Indonesia. The fourth edition, published as recently as 1986, seems to have been restricted entirely to Dutch readers in the Netherlands. Two editions of the Indonesian translation (1975 and 1999) have gone relatively unnoticed, but see Goenawan (2013). For details, see Termorshuizen (1986).

¹⁶ I once came across a very telling example of this in my teaching. I had assigned Camara Laye's *African Child (L'Enfant Noir)*, an autobiographical account of a West African childhood, to students to read. In the course of discussion in a seminar, one of my students said that scribbled in the margins of the library text which she had borrowed was a note next to a description of a particular ritual stating that the information was incorrect. Like my student I was astonished by the temerity of anyone questioning this ethnographic feature of the text and wondered who the anonymous commentator might have been. It was not until some years later, during a conversation with my colleague Clive Wake, that I learned that there was a controversy about the degree to which Laye could properly be considered the author of the text. The question of its authorship has now been thoroughly examined by Adele King (2002), and the discrepancies noted by the anonymous commentator can now be understood.

communal security and forcing upon them a frequently uncomfortable self-scrutiny. The impulse towards estrangement underlying these novels runs quite contrary to the novel written for outsiders and therefore has profound implications for interpreting the statements being made in the texts.

The insider's novel for insiders

We have to begin here with one immediate qualification to pre-empt a possible criticism. The insider's novel frequently assumes a reader who is only partly incorporated into the social and moral universe at the heart of the novel. Indeed, a great number of the novels which appear in the contemporary European novel-publishing industry deliberately take as their point of departure the readers' relative ignorance of the context of the action even when that action is set in the midst of their own societies. It might therefore seem that the distinction between writing for outsiders and insiders is a specious one. But in fact, even though the element of the strange and slightly alien does play a part in the appeal of these European novels, no one, surely, would dispute, first, that the dynamics of the novel and the articulation of the subtlety of the interaction between the characters rely heavily on the reader sharing in great part the attitudes and indeed experiences of the principals in the novel. Nor, secondly, would anyone be likely to argue that, where the intention of the novel is more than simply the display of ingenuity in the construction of the plot – the old element of adventure – the writer is implicitly assuming the reader's familiarity with the universe of decision-making and reflection at the heart of the novel. It is precisely this familiarity which needs to become the possession of anthropologists working in what is, at least initially, a more or less alien moral and social environment. One avenue to acquiring an intimacy with the complexities of that universe, I am arguing, is through the critical reading of novels in vernacular languages.

In these circumstances, the reading of the novel presents a double opportunity: the intermittent exploration and incremental learning of indigenous readers' consciousness, implicitly addressed in the assumptions of the novel; and also a testing of the degree to which the anthropologist has indeed already appropriated the universe of discourse and can therefore fully enter into the *'αγων*, (*agōn*), or central conflict, of the novel.

Within our own intellectual socialization, we have the experience of growing into reading maturity, a slow development of critical judgement acquired after more or less intensive and extensive reading and reflection over a range of literature, where there occurs a cumulative acquisition of reading sophistication set against a continual broadening and

deepening of personal experience.¹⁷ The process increases our confidence in our habits of discernment and evaluation. The same process occurs or should occur with the anthropological reader: working within different milieux, local, ethno-linguistic, regional or national, she comes to acquire the confidence not of the occasional sojourner but of the near native. And an index of that confidence, as within one's own intellectual milieu, is an ability to engage critically in the propositions made in the novels in relation to inter-personal relations within the context of shifting moral values and political ideals.

When a writer is working at this level of appealing directly to his or her peers, the conventions and direction of the novel, despite the apparently similar exploitation of verisimilitude to which the form is intrinsically wedded, will be very different from the novel written for the outsider. And this is not simply a matter of excluding glosses of indigenous terms or explanations of local rituals, but, at a far more telling level, of taking up matters that perplex the native reader and eschewing those that are only likely to appeal to the (voyeuristic) outsider. An acute awareness of this point lies at the heart of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's decision to abandon writing novels in English, since the latter could not but be directed to outsiders, and to write instead in Gikuyu for his own community (see note 6).

This dilemma of deciding whom to write for never acquired the same urgency in India, since, despite Macaulay's best intentions, from the nineteenth century Indian intellectuals had continued to write in the vernacular languages and had quite happily taken over the form of the novel and adapted it to the needs of their increasing numbers of readers.¹⁸ Thus for well over one and a half centuries Indian writers have been probing the potential of the novel to make statements about their own society. One of the examples best known to English readers is Bibhutibhushan Banerjee's *Pather Panchali*, brought to wide notice as a result of Satyajit Ray's famous film of the same name. In the preface to the translation Clark (in Banerji 1969) makes the point that, in order to facilitate the non-native reader's understanding, various glosses have been inserted into the text by way of explaining otherwise potentially obscure references, rather than using footnotes for this purpose. Occasionally, unobtrusive as most of

¹⁷ With regard to this acquisition of critical reading competence, I strongly concur with Stanley Fish and others who talk about an 'interpretive community', and with Jonathan Culler, who emphasises a shared understanding of the conventions of reading: '...works remain opaque to those who have not assimilated the appropriate conventions.... Reading and interpretation may be carried out in solitude, but they are highly social activities' (Culler 1980: 53). Suleiman (1980) provides an excellent overview of these perspectives on reading. In exactly the same way as Culler prescribes, anthropological readers should, in my view, endeavour to assimilate the textual conventions of the literature of the communities in which they become immersed. See, too, note 6 above.

¹⁸ Clark (1970) provides a good overview of how this happened.

them are, these insertions do create the appearance of a text written for outsiders. In fact, however, the narrative is so obviously strange to the outsider (not just in terms of the exploration of the social conventions and interdependent relationships which make up the dynamics of village society at that time in India's history circa 1905) and yet so clearly familiar to the novels' intended readership that the anthropological reader is immediately challenged and excited by recognizing that this is a tale told by a teller to his own community.

Because most of us outside Bengal know the novel only in translation, it is, of course, inevitable that there is much we miss. However, here is not the place to discuss the limitations of the novel in translation. The arguments are well known and to none better than to the anthropologist, but the inevitable limitations should not obscure the potential of the translated novel.¹⁹ We all have reading experiences of great translated works of fiction, and we are immeasurably richer for that reading. To reiterate, this is not because of the factual information we learn indirectly from those texts, but from glimpses into complex webs of understanding. Most of us know this from translations of the great European novels, some of us from the translations of the equally great novels of India, the Arab world and the Far East.

The professional anthropologist, the specialist in the region, if she is serious in her desire to disseminate a wider understanding of the societies in which she engages, has, it seems to me, an obligation both to herself to take seriously these fictional versions of the reality she knows, and to her readers to direct them to those works in translation or in the original language which seek to disclose the deeper meanings, sets of values and entanglement of emotions underlying superficial appearances. The anthropologist must also be a literary critic. Let me demonstrate what is at stake here by exploring within my own area of competence, modern Indonesia, what such criticism might look like.

As noted above, in contrast with Africa and India, there has been no tradition of European language writing in Indonesia or Malaysia. Writers there have consistently written their fictions not for outsiders but for their immediate peers. However, this remark requires some qualification, especially with reference to Indonesia, since we find that the Indonesian language, although the national language, is a second language to a large percentage of the population, especially so in the past. Moreover, writers, especially those from the Minangkabau region of west Sumatra, used to exploit the potential of this widespread second

¹⁹ Even such a determined champion of the near impossibility of responding appropriately to works of literature which are not written in one's native language as Dr Leavis felt that he could comment on *Anna Karenina* in the Maude translation, although, admittedly, he had some reservations (Leavis 1967: 9).

language to address readers outside their immediate ethno-linguistic groups and inform them of the peculiarities of their systems of tradition and customary practice. Furthermore, Dutch colonial government sponsorship of publications often set the parameters of the discursive space of the novels in terms of what the Dutch regarded as the bounds of good taste and political correctness.²⁰ Nonetheless the novel in Indonesia has evolved rapidly since then, and in the greater intellectual freedom of contemporary times, novelists now make assumptions about the common understandings shared by their readers and consequently push them in greater earnestness to reflect on their positioning in contemporary Indonesian society. This is especially noticeable in historical novels dealing with the colonial period, such as those by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Umar Khayam and Y.B. Mangunwidjaja. Contained within all those novels, however, are not only reflections or descriptions of colonial conflicts seen from the native's point of view, but also wider debates about the values and structures underpinning indigenous social organization.

In novels and stories dealing with contemporary issues, there is no hesitation in representing the political dimension of recent history, especially in relation to the period following the coup of 1965 and the subsequent period of Suharto's so-called New Order. And within the last two decades, with the extraordinary expansion of the publishing industry, in addition to what might be termed the 'serious novel', there have emerged those novels which one associates with globalization: teenage romances, religion inspired fiction, campus novels, chick-lit (known in Indonesian as *sastra wangi* [perfume literature]), and many translations. Most of these novels take as their cultural locus contemporary metropolitan life-styles, often spilling over into foreign locations: this is the educated middle-class writing for itself and assuming a sense of shared expectations and values in relation to what contemporary Indonesia has to offer it.

At a very different level of appeal, regional literatures in the vernacular reach another readership altogether. Let me illustrate this with reference to the Sundanese language spoken in West Java by 35 million speakers as their mother tongue. The weekly Sundanese popular journal *Manglé*, published in Bandung, carries a variety of representative fictional material, several short stories, one or two serials, one of which is usually a translation, and a jokes page. The stories range from a description of Indonesians living in the US to minor personal and family tragedies occurring in the cities of west Java to ghost stories set in small villages. The magazine is pitched in such a way that it appeals to both the lower middle classes and

²⁰ For a comprehensive account of Dutch policy in this respect, see Jedamski (1990).

Sundanese -speaking intellectuals with a sense of local belonging, but the limited range of reference makes it on the whole unappealing to those who read the metropolitan Indonesian fiction described above, even when they have the linguistic skill to read it. Nonetheless, the detailed local reference and the earnest gesturing towards realism and verisimilitude, even in the ghost stories, constantly invites the committed reader to recognize her own positioning within west Javanese society and to respond appropriately to the probing of the fiction (Watson 2019).

Realist Indonesian fiction is, then, wide-ranging, but before addressing the question what a reading of it will convey to the anthropological reader, let me enter a caveat. Much of this fiction, judged in its own terms – that is, according to the conventions of realist fiction filtered through the demands and expectations of Indonesian writers and readers – is disappointing stuff: in other words, the intellectual and moral challenges presented to the reader are not profound. There are, of course, exceptions here, as the international acclaim accorded to Eka Kurniawan's *Tiger Man* demonstrates. However, the argument has not been that anthropologists should read this literature exclusively in the expectation that it will be 'profound', but that in grasping the assumptions made of the reader, the anthropologist will find herself coming that much closer to the goal of shared understanding. Irrespective of the credibility of the narrative, the fiction carries dimensions of humour and irony, and indeed the panoply of linguistic rhetoric, as well as making implicit references to a set of positional moral values and social understandings which, if they can be appreciated and appropriated by the reader, allow a synoptic access to the society. An anthropologist's understanding is built up laboriously from personal encounters in the field from which, gradually, an always tentative composite impression of the society is half-consciously constructed. What this insider fiction offers is an opportunity to participate at the writer's meta-level of the interpretation of contemporary reality.

Let me illustrate at this point the potential of the exercise with a few remarks on a prize-winning short story by a well-known Indonesian writer, A.A. Navis (1975). It is entitled *Jodoh*, and the word itself immediately alerts the anthropologist to the need not only for translation but also a measure of interpretation. The word means a match, something or someone who fits with something else. But for the Indonesian reader it carries a heavy connotation of an ideal marriage partner. This does not convey any necessary idea of romantic love; it is more a question of suitability, but even that is not quite right, because there is also almost a sense of fate, destiny, in the word. If two people who seem ideally suited do not in the end get married, then one can still say they were not *jodoh*. Seeing the

word as the title of the story, then, the reader is consequently prepared for reversals and misfortunes as much as marriages. Most Indonesians reading the story will recognise Navis as a male Minangkabau who writes frequently about the socio-cultural milieu of his own society, with its matrilineal institutions and its strong profession of Islam. They will also know that he has a strong bent for humour and mordant satire. This knowledge, then, creates a predisposition in the reader in relation to the narrative that follows and how it should be critically approached.

The expectations arising from the reader's predispositions are immediately met by the structure of the narrative – the tale is told through the perspective of a thirty-year old man looking for a suitable wife – the mild irony, the stylised linguistic humour, and the twists of the plot which relate how a young couple eventually get married after a falling out. The humour of the story lies in picking up the various cues relating to attitudes to courtship and marriage and the behavioural conventions which accompany those attitudes. Among the topical issues raised are the potential fear of Badri, the hero, of being drawn in to a uxori-local marriage, the advisability of looking for a wife who has a steady income as a civil servant, and his own unattractiveness as a suitor because he is not a 'pure' Minangkabau – his mother is not an ethnic Minangkabau, although she was brought up in West Sumatra. Now all these matters strike resonances with the Indonesian reader and constitute the appeal of the story. But to anyone unfamiliar with the society it might read as rather banal. For the Indonesian, as for the anthropological reader, I would submit, it is almost Chekhovian in the manner in which it mockingly dissects courtship practice in a gentle comedy of manners. It is not that the story simply supplements one's knowledge of the society, any more than Chekhov's stories could be considered supplementary; it is more that, taken as whole, the story offers an entrée into a way of thinking, perceiving and evaluating. Its appreciation relies on an exact distancing between the reader and the reality of the narrated subject, which is carefully defined through the manipulation of literary realism. It is not sufficient to understand the surface reality of the story; one must be able to grasp its point, its interpretive perspective, and before one can fully accomplish that, one must be inward with the society.

Conclusion

If the intention of anthropology is to explore human relationships in the past and present with a view to enhancing our capacity for self-understanding by moving ever deeper into the *Lebenswelten*, the conceptual worlds, that are different from one's own formative personal experience, then the critical reading of the novel must now, in the 21st century, be a major

element in that anthropological endeavour to understand and interpret. Not all of us will have the linguistic skills to read the novels and the stories – or the archives and the newspapers – and consequently most anthropological readers will have to rely on translations and commentary. But the anthropological specialist whose responsibility it is to interpret and mediate understanding must be able to inspire confidence that she has the required facility, that the constructions which she offers her readers for acceptance do emerge from an earnest and intense grappling not just with the observable lived experience but with the attribution of meaning and value to that experience by those who live it. The novel provides the anthropological reader with unique access to the production of cultural meaning,²¹ since, although an interpretation, it is not over-interpreted; and although synoptic and tending to closure, it is not as systematically categorical as an ethnography and is therefore open to shifting positions of agreement and dissent within a full critical engagement.²²

It is, of course, the critical response that needs emphasising, not the simple understanding. As a consequence of European colonialism, the legacy of which still blurs the vision – perhaps even more so today, when it is refracted through the contemporary influence of globalization and the production and transfer of knowledge – novels describing the experience which the curious anthropologist wishes to explore still come in the packaged categories described above. Written from different perspectives as observers and insiders, each is directed to a different readership and each is offered as a distinct version of the construction of the society. In reading and recommending these novels, it must be the anthropologist's task to point out the differences among them and make those fine discriminations that will allow us to recognize the universality of the prompting to record with all seriousness, by means of its textual resources, a society's self-reflections over time and distance, as well as across mental worlds.

²¹ Fabian (1993) makes the same point forcefully. He argues that, as a consequence of global expansion, texts are to be found in even the remotest communities and that anthropologists should pay heed to them by relating them to the specific contexts of their production and reading.

²² It is the recognition of the peculiar epistemological status of the novel that has prompted ethnographers in these post-modernist times (see Visweswaran 1994: 15-16 for a useful comment) to suggest that ethnographers too should use the strategies of the novel to present their accounts, those of the external observer again, but one more informed as a consequence of a different positioning within the world of the subject than her colonial predecessor. Andrew Strathern also describes how the form of the autobiographical novel is a useful vehicle for conveying Diltheyan 'understanding' (1993: 93). The issue of how the new ethnographic novel should be written and how we should be training our students in the writing of these texts, in the same way as we train them to make ethnographic films or write doctoral theses, has yet to be fully addressed.

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