

16. Literature and limits

Stories from Indonesia

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In 1996, Indonesian author Seno Gumira Ajidarma published a story collection entitled *Jazz, Perfume, and the Incident*. The book was about the Dili Incident (sometimes dubbed the Santa Cruz or Dili Massacre) in East Timor where Indonesian soldiers killed more than 250 pro-independence protesters in East Timor. The event took place in the Santa Cruz cemetery, the city of Dili, on 12 November 1991 and was part of the genocide practiced during the Indonesian occupation of East Timor (Ajidarma, 2004). At that time, Seno was an editor at the journal called *Jakarta Jakarta*, an urban lifestyle magazine that published under *Kompas* Gramedia Group, one of the eight biggest media conglomerates in Indonesia (Tapsell, 2017). Seno sent a reporter to investigate what happened in Santa Cruz and was terrified by the reports. According to several interviews with persons who had witnessed the incident, there were killings, torture, rape; Indonesian soldiers forced people to eat their Rosario, pregnant women were killed, their bellies ripped open to make sure the fetuses were dead as well, and severed heads were planted on house fences as symbolic warnings. What happened in Santa Cruz was a violation of human rights at a level beyond imagination.

When it was time to write the article, Seno was extra careful since he was well aware that under President Suharto's authoritative leadership style at the time, one mistake could put an end to the magazine. He tried his best to make the narrative less threatening to the government. He interviewed people from the military to give the article a sense of

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balance. Nevertheless, the first edition (Seno had planned to publish a thematic series) sent the government into a fury. Jakob Oetama, owner of the *Kompas* Gramedia Group, asked him to stop writing. *Jakarta Jakarta* was closed and Seno ended up unemployed. That was when he decided to write his novel, *Jazz, Perfume, and the Incident*. In 2002, the English version of the book was published, to reach a greater audience. Seno used nicknames for the city of Dili and the people, but the rest of the story was based on pure, solid facts. In the foreword to the book, he wrote, “Call it fact if you will. Call it fiction, if you prefer. It’s just a metropolitan novel” (Ajidarma, 2002). Seno then coined the sentence, which later became popular in both the media and the literary world: “when journalism is silenced, literature must speak up.”

The *Jazz* book has brought Seno popularity not only among literary fans, but also in the activist community. It provides information about the cruelty and savagery of the New Order (name given to Suharto regime) which the public might not otherwise be aware of, or more possibly, might be unable to discuss for fear of repercussions. *Jazz* is actually not the first work in which Seno criticizes the government. His story *Penembak Misterius*, about a sniper who has been assigned to kill a politician, was published in the mid-1980s. After *Jazz*, Seno has consistently exposed and condemned government-sponsored violence. He wrote a short story *Clara*, about the rape of ethnic Chinese women in the May 1998 riots, the play *Kenapa kau culik anak kami?* [Why did you kidnap our children?], as well as the short story *Telpon dari Aceh* [Phone call from Aceh] in 1999. Seno’s strategy, to use literature when journalism is not possible, put him in a unique position to reach a larger audience, both literary fans and people who are interested in political events. As one of the most-read authors in Indonesia, Seno’s works exemplify the middle-class artistic mode of resistance (Bodden, 1999).

From authoritarianism to freedom of expression

Since declaring its independence on August 17, 1945, Indonesia has experienced three changes of democracy, i.e. Parliamentary Democracy (1949–1957), Guided Democracy (1959–1965), both under President Sukarno; and Pancasila Democracy (March 1966–May 1998) under President Suharto. The period of Parliamentary Democracy, which Indonesianist Herbert Feith called Constitutional Democracy, has several distinct characteristics, including civilians playing a dom-

inant role; civil liberties were rarely infringed; and, government used coercion sparingly. When Sukarno came up with the idea of Guided Democracy, those distinct characteristics were pretty much gone. This is because in his attempt of implementing Guided Democracy, Sukarno put executive authority, especially himself as president, at the center of power. Sukarno even exercised his power in the pop culture sphere, where in 1965 he sent to jail Koes Bersaudara, an Indonesian band, which specialized in The Beatles' songs, because they seemed too "westernized".

A great contrast to liberal democracy, Guided Democracy later resulted in economic collapse and a power struggle between the army and Indonesia's Communist Party or PKI. In 1965, there was massive killing by Indonesian soldiers who targeted civilians allegedly involved with the Indonesia Communist Party (PKI). Finally, an army *coup d'état* on 11 March 1966 forced President Sukarno to hand over power to Suharto. The new president called his government the New Order [Orde Baru], implying a brand-new Indonesia which was to be better, stronger, and more prosperous. However, the New Order slowly began to shift to a dictatorship (Bhakti, 2004). Freedom of expression was highly regulated. For example, any writings, discussions, seminars or works of art, which discussed the 1965 mass murder, were banned. Books by the leftist author Pramoedya Ananta Toer were prohibited. Suharto also issued the 1966 parliamentary decree, which bans Marxism-Leninism, the PKI, and other leftist organizations (Hearman, 2015).

In August 1968, a few years after Suharto had seized power, *Sastra* magazine published a short story, "*Langit makin mendung*" ["A darkening sky"], written under the pen name "Ki Panji Kusmin" often interpreted as an acronym of "Kibarkan Panji Komunisme" or "Unfurl the Banners of Communism". It told the story of Prophet Muhammad descending to Earth with the Archangel Gabriel to investigate why there were a decreasing number of Indonesian Muslims being permitted to enter into heaven. They find that Indonesian Muslims are being corrupted by *nasakom*, a government policy during Sukarno's administration, which combined nationalism, religion, and communism (Deakin, 1976). The author used narratives that were considered offensive by some, especially by Muslims. For example, when talking about Indonesian Muslims, the narrative informed the reader:

“There has been an exceedingly long drought in that area, and the heat of the sun has been burning up their stupid brains for far too long.”

Gabriel also warned Muhammad that:

“Your Excellency’s faithful have almost yielded to the teachings of this false prophet Nasakom.”

There was also a conversation between the President and the Minister of Health about the influenza epidemic in Jakarta:

“Say, General, can this ‘flu cause death or not?”

“No, sir.”

“So there’s no danger?”

“No, sir. The only danger is from the Communists, sir!”

“Oh, you and your Commie-phobia!”

The magazine was immediately banned from North Sumatra. Angry Muslims attacked *Sastra*’s Jakarta office. H. B. Jassin, a respected figure in Indonesian literature who was the magazine’s editor-in-chief, was accused of blasphemy; he was sentenced to one-year suspended imprisonment. The real identity of Ki Pandji Kusmin (some said that it was H.B. Jassin himself) remains a mystery until this day.

A Nobel candidate

Another name that is very important in Indonesian literature was Pramoedya (Pram) Ananta Toer (1925–2006). Considered the only Indonesian author worthy of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Pram was best known for his four novels, the *Buru Tetralogy*, which told the story of Minke – wordplay from the Dutch pronunciation of “monkey”. The Minke character was inspired by Tirta Adhisoerjo, a brilliant journalist whom some consider to be Indonesia’s father of journalism. Tirta was known for his sharp criticism towards the Dutch colonial government.¹ He started life studying for a medical degree but ended up establishing his very own newspaper, *Medan Prijaji*, in 1907. He used the newspaper as a medium for educated native Indonesians. *Medan Prijaji* lasted for five years. In 1912, Tirta was exiled to Bacan (an island located in South Halmahera Municipality, North Maluku, Indonesia).

Pram’s life was not so different from the life of Tirta. He was imprisoned for 15 years for his novels and political outspokenness, first by the

Dutch colonial government, then by Sukarno, then Suharto. In October 1965, Pramoedya was arrested during the events, which brought Sukarno down, and the New Order began. His work was banned, and his unpublished writings, personal archives, and research materials were destroyed. Pram spent fourteen years on the remote Buru Island, without writing utensils for the first seven years. He created the *Buru Tetralogy* by telling the stories orally to his fellow prisoners (Toer & GoGwilt, 1996). Pram used Tirta's voice to offer an alternative narrative about Indonesia's history as a nation. This is important because during New Order, the version of history recounted massively and structurally through school lessons and books was a version approved by the government. The *Buru Tetralogy* was known for its very personal narrative, using the first-person point of view, dealing with power manifested in culture and society in everyday life. It was always Pram's intention to challenge the conservative history of the Indonesian nationalist movement and the Indonesian literature, which others were producing at the time. He especially wanted to give nationalist figures such as Tirta Adhi Suryo and Mas Marco Kartodikromo the recognition they deserved; that is, as founders of the independence movement (Vickers, 2013).

The two narratives

After his 32 years in power, Suharto was overthrown as a result of the dictatorship, corruption and economic crisis of his regime. In May 1998, Suharto handed over leadership to Vice-President B. J. Habibie. Indonesia officially entered the era of the Reformation. As the tap on the freedom of expression was opened wide, Pancasila², the nation's ideology, faced a tremendous challenge. The values of pluralism carried by Pancasila are currently threatened by intolerance and the exclusive attitude of religious radical groups. People from different groups grew suspicious; they cultivated distrust and hatred towards one another (Victoria, 2017). This situation has provided a fresh breeze for the extreme right. The ideology of *al khalifah al Islamiyyah* (the notion of forming a government based on Islamic law³) and radicalism is increasingly popular. Nowadays, authors face hostility whenever they write about topics deemed insulting to someone else's religious values. They may be branded as *kafirs* (infidels) and charged with committing blasphemy. Publishers (especially bigger, more profit-oriented ones)

started to apply self-censorship. I experienced this self-censorship firsthand when publishing my first novel, “*Semusim, dan semusim lagi*” [“A season and then another”] with Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2013. In one section of the book the protagonist talks about some people who love cats because they believe that the cat was Prophet Muhammad’s favorite pet. The protagonist then wondered what would happen if Prophet Muhammad was “a bit eccentric and loved the neon iguana instead”. The publisher cut off the “a bit eccentric” part right away.

Thus, even 20 years after the beginning of the Reformation Era, Indonesian authors still face the challenge of limits being placed on their literary activities. Indeed, there is no one dictatorial figure feared by everyone, but instead there are symptoms of fascism in the air. I would argue that these symptoms manifest themselves through at least two narratives. First, the purification of Islam, which means that everything that is not in accord with “Islamic” values should be considered offensive and should be resisted and opposed. In 2012, a hard-liner group, Islam Defenders Front (FPI), reported publishing company PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama (GPU) to the Jakarta Police for circulating a book it claimed “defamed Islam” (Mahditama, 2012). Two days later, GPU not only recalled the books, which were already in circulation, but also burned hundreds of them in the front yard of their office. The book burning was witnessed by the Chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI)’s Fatwa Commission, Ma’ruf Amin (who is currently running as President Jokowi’s candidate for Vice President) and three other MUI officials. Also present was President Director of Gramedia Pustaka Utama, Wandu S Brata. The book in question was a translated version of Douglas James Wilson’s *Five cities that rule the world*. In the book, Douglas wrote that Muhammad conquered Mecca by becoming a marauder and pirate, attacking Meccan caravans, and ordering assassinations in order to gain control of Medina (Hasani, 2016). The book-burning case is a perfect example of when freedom of expression collides with values held by the so-called majority. In such situations, publishers choose to yield to their threats in order to avoid commotion.

Second, the so-called danger of communist revival is another sign of incipient fascism. For some reasons and stemming from unknown sources, sections of the population fear that the PKI will return to power in no time. To get a better picture of this, let us look at what happened

during the event of the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival (UWRF) 2015. Three discussion sessions related to communism and 1965 were cancelled, including a panel to discuss what happened in Bali during the 1965 massacre,⁴ a screening of *The look of silence* documentary film by Joshua Oppenheimer, and a photo exhibition of *The act of killing* about 1960s survivors. These cancelled discussions extended to other issues that could potentially “disturb the public peace”, such as a panel on the Bali reclamation project. In a project, developer Tirta Wahana Bali International (TWBI), wanted to build artificial islands that would cover almost half of Benoa Bay in south Bali. The project was canceled in August 2018 due to the expiry of TWBI’s license and strong opposition from the community whose members organized themselves in For BALI (Forum Rakyat Bali Tolak Reklamasi Benoa). UWRF also canceled two novel launches; *From now on everything will be different* by Eliza Vitri Handayani about the life of youth in the early reform period in 1998, and *The Crocodile hole* by Saskia Wieringa, a lecturer in Amsterdam and a researcher on gender studies. *Crocodile Hole* was banned because the content included information about Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, or Indonesian Women’s Movement) one of the largest Indonesian women’s organization in the 1950s and 1960s, and an affiliate of the Indonesian Communist Party (Dwifatma, 2015). I was at UWRF 2015, attending the Emerging Writers Program. The ridiculous fact about all the sessions canceled is that nobody really knows why the communism topic should be banned. All the policemen and *pecalang* (local security officers in Bali) who asked nicely for those sessions to be banned did not really understand what communism is, so it was rather pointless trying to reason with them. The discussion on the book, *The crocodile hole*, was later moved to a restaurant and a number of plain-clothes police were present taking photos of those in attendance. When asked what the photos were for, they looked confused and said “documentation”.

On a larger note, rising radicalism and the fear of communism are serious threats for the nation. When ex-governor of Jakarta, the Chinese Christian Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (known as Ahok), was charged with blasphemy, there were many fake news/hoaxes circulating through social media and text message applications (Yee, 2017). Ahok has angered religious radical groups in Indonesia for referring to a verse of

Al Qur'an during a campaign session in Kepulauan Seribu, Jakarta. He told the people there not to be fooled by so-called Islamist politician who use the verse, Al-Maidah: 51, to justify that Muslims should not be led by non-Muslims (Lamb, 2016). Another event worth noting was a small rally against communism held in Jakarta on September 29, a day before the commemoration of the September 30 movement.⁵ The rally participants centered their protest on the issue of revival of communism. A week before, this same issue sparked a mob attack on the office of the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI). An angry mob attacked YLBHI during a public event, claiming that the event is supporting communism (*The Jakarta Post*, 2017). However, in a recent survey conducted by Saiful Mujani Research Center (SMRC), 86.8 per cent of people do not believe that there is a revival of Indonesia's Communist Party or PKI. Only around 12.6 per cent agree that there is currently such a revival and only five percent of all Indonesians feel that the PKI's revival is a threat to the nation (Balowski, 2017).

What is next in store for Indonesian literature?

The previous examples are indeed not encouraging for Indonesian literature. After going through the dictatorship in the Suharto era, the country's literary scene is now experiencing threats from radical religious groups. They may not be many in number, but their voices are loud and they are not reluctant when it comes to using violence. The literary world in Indonesia also faces threats from unfocused fears about the rise of communism. Earlier this year in Padang, West Sumatra, the Army held a book raid, which allegedly sought to suppress the teachings of communism. The same thing also happened in Kediri, East Java, at the end of last year (Arbi, 2019).

I would argue that the hope for Indonesian literature today lies in the generation of young writers. They are the privileged generation, in the sense of having easy access to various versions of Indonesian history, while at the same time staying connected to what is happening globally. A survey conducted by *Trio* showed that Generation Z, those who were born in mid 1990s to mid-2000s, are not afraid to talk about sensitive issues since they are much more open-minded than previous generations (Gerintya, 2018). Accordingly, authors from the younger generation are also becoming more open-minded when it comes to writing stories.

Take Norman Erikson Pasaribu (born 1990), for example. He is openly gay and has written about LGBT issues in almost all of his works. His latest poetry book, *Sergius Seeks Bacchus* (Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2016) won first prize in the 2015 Jakarta Arts Council Poetry Competition and was shortlisted for the 2016 Khatulistiwa Literary Award for Poetry. In the book, Norman wrote about his own experience as a gay person, as well as Indonesian society's dynamic relationship with LGBT issues. The book was named after two fourth-century Christian martyrs whom the gay community has adopted as icons, and contains thirty-three poems—the number of poems corresponding to the age at which Christ was crucified. Norman, like many other young Indonesian authors, is not limiting himself when it comes to the scope of his writing. Instead of doing self-censorship, these young writers try to be as honest and as open as possible.

The strongest advantage to fiction lies in its power of storytelling. Good storytelling can play with emotional, motivational and psychological aspects of the reader's ontology. Compared to news or scientific articles, fiction shows clearer and stronger sympathy for the fate of humankind. Fiction may not be directly about social politics, but it cannot be completely free from social and political context. Fictional works, however bizarre or surreal they may be, do not come from empty space. They always contain memories, events, experience and knowledge of the authors and the society they live in. Norman's poems and stories, for instance, not only tell his personal experience as a gay person, but also the hetero-normative standards existing today in society and how it puts LGBT people in difficult situations. Those stories might help make people aware of what happens in society and empathize with those who are marginalized. In that sense, authors should never stop learning new things and keep their minds open to various subjects in their everyday lives. Authors should also not hesitate to address topics that might conflict with the dominant narrative in society. It is precisely in this condition that fiction can take the role of providing alternative views for the community. Instead of limiting fiction, we should encourage literacy and intertextual understanding for readers, so that fiction is not merely understood as the author's fantasy; nor should it be condemned as something dangerous which needs to be silenced. Only by having the courage to do so, can a writer

see to it that her or his fiction is enjoyed both as a work of art and an alternative source to truth.

Notes

1. There is no definite period of Dutch occupation in Indonesia. It was Sukarno who, in his 1950 speech, said that Indonesia was colonized by the Dutch for 350 years. This information was adopted by history books at schools, but lately many doubted it because there were no regions in Indonesia that were colonized by the Dutch for that whole period. See Resink (2012) for further reading. The book *Bumi Manusia* covers the period between 1898 and 1918, where the Dutch's Ethical Policy helped empower the educated Indonesian elite, members of whom later established new organizations and developed leadership.
2. Pancasila is the official national principle of Indonesia. The name "Pancasila" was coined from Old Javanese words, "Panca" (means 'five') and "Sila" (means 'principles'). Pancasila was a concept brought together by Indonesia's founding fathers, and it was Sukarno, the first president, who crystallized the concept in his speech on June 1, 1945. The five principles are belief in one God; just and civilized humanity; the unity of Indonesia; democracy; and social justice. See Jhoner (2018) for further reading.
3. In the aftermath of Suharto's fall in 1998, some radical Islamist groups (the most vocal one: Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia) promoted the view that Indonesia needs a radical change from democracy to *al-khalifah al-Islamiyyah* (Islamic caliphate). The idea of *al-khalifah al-Islamiyyah* is the nation should be based on Islamic law instead of democracy. HTI made use of growing public dissatisfaction with the weak impact that political, economic, and law reforms introduced in the reformasi era had when it came to improving people's daily lives. See Muhtadi (2009) for further reading.
4. See Cribb (1991) for further reading.
5. The 30 September Movement (often abbreviated as G30S) refers to Indonesian National Armed Forces members who assassinated six Indonesian Army generals on 1 October 1965 due to a coup plan. In the days that followed, the army blamed the coup attempt on the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). It led immediately to the imprisonment and death of thousands of alleged Communists and Communist sympathizers. Under the "New Order" regime, the movement was later called "G30S/PKI". See Roosa (2006) for further reading.

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