Greetings from the ED

In the midst of discouraging signs of a sharp surge in the number of people infected with the Covid-19 virus, came the shocking news that the indomitable Ibu Toeti Heraty Noerhadi-Rooseno, Grand Dame of Indonesian arts and culture, had passed away of a heart attack. It was hard to take in at first, given that only a few weeks before she was seen speaking at webinars and attending virtual board meetings. After all, Ibu Toeti was always in great demand as a speaker on a variety of subjects, ranging from education and women’s rights to Indonesian literature and the arts. Right to the end, she was the quintessential Indonesian woman, loyal to her country’s traditions and her customs.

Not surprisingly, Ibu Toeti was a role model. She obtained her medical and psychology degrees from the University of Indonesia, then continued her studies in the Netherlands where she earned a doctorate in philosophy. She taught psychology at the University of Indonesia and eventually landed a professorship, all the while managing a business and raising a family of four children.

Toeti began writing poetry in 1966 and four years later published her first collection titled Sajak-Sajak (Poems) followed by a series of fiction and non-fiction works. Later in her life, she would devote herself to causes involving injustice and the pursuit of equal rights, in particular those of women. She chaired some women’s groups and co-founded the first publication dedicated to women: Jurnal Perempuan. She will also be remembered

Ruminations

Toeti’s Betel and Lime

In my column of July 2018 I wrote briefly about Toeti Heraty and our work together on the publication, “A Taste of Betel and Lime.” In honor of her recent passing (13 June 2021) I offer a much revised and expanded version of that account.

In January 1977, I enrolled in the Faculty of Letters at the University of Indonesia where, among other subjects, I studied “Comparative Indonesian Literature” with poet-lecturer Sapardi Djoko Damono. Another poet-lecturer was also at U.I. at the time: Toeti Heraty, who was teaching (and raising four children) even as she pursued her doctoral degree in philosophy, but it was not then or there I met this friend for life. Our initial meeting took place in July 1978 at the time of the first ASEAN Poetry Festival which was held at the Jakarta Arts Center, Taman Ismail Marzuki.

Following that one semester at the University of Indonesia, from January to June 1977, I began working full time as a translator, hoping to have my literary translations published but, constantly failing in that, supporting myself with the proceeds from business-related translations: National Planning Board surveys, annual reports for multinational companies, investment and development plans for foreign investors, and so on.

Thus it was that in early 1978 when, at the recommendation of Sapardi Djoko Damono, the Jakarta Arts Council (Dewan Kesenian Jakarta) asked me to translate into English all the poems by Indonesian authors who were to appear at the ASEAN Poetry Festival, I immediately consented to do the work. There would be no payment for this work but, at least, I thought, more Indonesian literati would become aware of my existence and growing dedication to the field of literary translation. Not that a slew of publishers immediately contacted me to engage my services in translating contemporary Indonesian literature—but one person did, and that was Toeti Heraty.

A multi-talented person, a Renaissance woman—philosopher, essayist, pianist, and poet, among other things—Toeti was also in the 1970s very much at the vanguard of the Indonesia’s feminist movement and had (with promised financial support from Nelly Malik, wife of then vice president, Abdul Malik) come up with the idea of publishing a bilingual, Indonesian-

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as a generous patron to young and upcoming artists, both purchasing their work and promoting promising artists with exhibitions at Cemara 6 Gallery which she established in 1993.

At Lontar, she will be most remembered for her many contributions of ideas and resources. She was a big believer in promoting Indonesian culture overseas and as a member of the board of directors, provided valuable inputs to the management and marketing of Lontar’s works. She will be sorely missed, especially during meetings when she would regale us with her stories and share with us the delicious snacks she always brought with her. Farewell, Ibu. Your legacy will be sure to live on.

English historical anthology of poetry by Indonesian women authors as a means of affirming the role and raising the profile of women in the world of Indonesian literature.

Toeti asked for my assistance in translating the collection and — Surprise of all surprises! — offered to pay me for my work: the grand sum of Rp. 200,000 (approximately Rp. 7.4 million or US$ 500 today). I jumped at Toeti’s offer, not for the money, obviously, but for the opportunity to work on a real book and to get my name into print. There was one challenge, however: I was returning to the U.S. to go to graduate school, meaning that we would not have the luxury of one-on-one meetings to discuss the poems or my translations. Everything would have to be done by mail and in those days, decades prior to the advent of e-mail, it generally took two weeks for a letter to go between Indonesia and the U.S. As such, it would take one month to have our questions to each other answered. (Further, as the cost of an international phone call was prohibitively expensive, that method of communication was instantly ruled out.)

I have in my file cabinet a folder with letters from Toeti and Winny Basoeki, her partner at PT Maya Budaya, an arts publications venture the two women established. The letters date from December 1978 to December 1979 and together form a condensed record of our work together on the book that would come to be.

In Toeti’s first letter to me, written on red paper and dated December 25, she wishes me a merry Christmas and a happy New Year and then discusses deadlines and work methods. She states that the original deadline for completion of the text and translation work, which had imaginatively been set for January 31, would be impossible to meet because I was in Wisconsin and she was in the middle of preparing for her doctoral defense scheduled for late January. She suggests that the deadline be moved to February 15.

Apparently, neither of us met the February deadline because in March 1979 I receive a note from Winny Basoeki acknowledging receipt of my first batch of translations and informing me that Toeti has gone to Geneva. (Soon after my return to the U.S., I was hired by the U.S. Department of State to serve as an escort-interpreter and for the next nine months I, too, was almost constantly on the road, leaving little time for me to work on our book.)

PS: We apologize for the late delivery of Lontar’s June newsletter caused by unforeseen circumstances.

Yuli Ismartono
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The first page of Toeti Heraty’s first letter to JHM regarding the publication of *A Taste of Betel and Lime*. 
One week later I receive a letter from Toeti postmarked Geneva and written on Hotel d’Auteuil letterhead paper. She has just bought a portable typewriter, she tells me, and that henceforth, I will be relieved to know, all future correspondence will be typed. She asks if I will be able to finish the translations by the end of March.

Winny Basoeki writes to me on April 4 informing me that they received my third batch of translations but in a letter from Toeti dated April 9, she asks me to take a closer look at my translations of “Surat Kasih” (Love Letter) by Siti Nuraini and “Sia-sia,” (In Vain) her own work. She also conveys regards from several friends: Sapardi, Dan Benyamin, and Sidney Jones.

As the weeks go by, some translations go missing in the mail, and the deadline for completion of the book gets pushed back as well but over time, as our correspondence continues, Toeti’s tone becomes ever friendlier and she begins to confide in me about various behind-the-scenes matters relating to the publication: Ibu Nelly is balking at the cost, Pak Ajip at Pustaka Jaya who will publish the book is not holding up his end of the job and all the work is falling on her shoulders. She even sends me the score for a song she has composed: “Saputangan dari Bandung Selatan” (A Kerchief from Southern Bandung).

By October of that year, the bulk of the work is done it seems because I am now working on the translation of footnotes—though still waiting for two replacement poems and Toeti’s introduction as well—and Toeti is especially pleased with my suggestion for the title of the book: Seserpih Pinang Sepucuk Sirih/A Taste of Betel and Lime. In that month’s letter she states that once she has obtained consent from Nelly Malik for the change in title, she will ask Ajip to redo the cover artwork to better fit the title. She also sends me a review by Subagio Sastrowardoyo of Harry Aveling’s recently-published collection of translations of Indonesian poetry, Contemporary Indonesian Poetry (University of Queensland Press, 1975) and comments that she is happy that I do not take as many risks as Harry. Nonetheless, she adds, I should “pay more attention to rhythm.”

Another delay occurs but, finally, on 12 December Toeti sends me her twenty-five page introduction to the book and one month later the English translation is complete and the book is finally ready for press, “only” one year behind schedule.
Remembering Toeti

Like rain for parched earth
is the joy that springs from friendship.

Once, when we were in her study
and talking about the past
she asked me to show her my ID Card
which she then studied for a long while
before asking, "Where is that code, ‘FP’
for former political prisoner?"

At the end of a long line of numbers
I pointed to the letters.

She blinked, her sharp eyes capturing a history
that scoured dignity.

Huffing angrily, she threw the ID card to the
floor,
"Monstrous thing! Why do you even have it
on you?"

She read
my mute eyes.

We then flew and alighted,
flew and alighted
from branch to branch
and cloud to cloud
in the wilds of hope.

Remembering Toeti
is recalling taking turns eating stewed jackfruit
and rice
from the same plate, a time made merry
with fits of laughter and talk of friends and
foes

It didn’t dawn on me at the time but when Pustaka Jaya released *A Taste of Betel and Lime* in 1980 that this was a historic moment for Indonesian women authors. No such a book had ever been published before. The book brought together, under one cover, 78 poems by 19 women authors whose date of creation—the poems, that is!—ranged from the 1930s to the 1970s. Making the book even more special is that it was illustrated with work by nine prominent women artists, thus shining a light on women visual artists as well. The book, with its jacket, larger-than-normal size (21 x 21 cm), and printed in full color, looked more like a “coffee-table” book than a collection of poetry. Even a cursory glance tells one that much time and thought had gone into the book and that the book and its contents were meant to be remembered and safeguarded, not merely consumed and then forgotten.

![The cover of *Seserpih Pinang Sepucuk Sirih/A Taste of Betel and Lime*](image)

The authors whose poems were included in the publication were Agnes Arswendo, Bibsy Soenharjo, Dwiarti Mardjono, Hamidah, Isma Sawitri, Joellia, Koentari, M. Poppy Hutagalung, Maria Amin, Nursjamsu, S. Rukiah, Sabarjati, Samiati Alisjahbana, Selasih, Siti Nuraini, Soegijarti, Sri Kusdyantinah, Walujati, and Toeti Heraty herself. I list all their names to make a point, to wit if one were to ask average Indonesians which of the names of these women authors they could identify, I suspect that the answer might only be Toeti herself who, until her recent death, remained perpetually active on Indonesia’s cultural scene. The sadness of this fact is somewhat assuaged by the knowledge that because of Toeti and her *Betel and Lime*, at least a portion of these authors’ creative output will forever remain accessible to readers. Toeti is and forever will be a true heroine in the struggle for gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Toeti did like an occasional glass of wine. Let us raise a glass to her!

John H. McGlynn

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which made more savory the morsels in our mouths.

Toeti has gone now
to someplace unknown,
one not found on any map,
while my ankles are tethered to a pillar in my home
to avoid corona’s clutches.

Remembering Toeti
is recalling morning’s footsteps

_Translated by John H. McGlynn_

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_Teringat Mbak Toeti Heraty_

seperti gerimis
membasah rengkah tanah,
melejitkan bahagia pertemanan

di satu waktu
berbicang masa lalu
Ia minta aku menunjukkan KTP,
dipandanginya lamar lamat
"Katanya ada kode ET,
dimananya?"
aku menunjukkan huruf ET,
di akhir deretan nomer yang panjang.

Ia berkedip, mata jelinya menangkap sejarah
yang menimak harkat
dengan berdengus marah ia,
melempar KTP ke lantai,
"KTP jelek begini kok dibawa bawa!?"

Surat dari Pejompongan

TOETI

Kawan Moer,

Baiklah kulanjutkan omonganku tentang keharuan dalam puisi.

Kau tahu, pada Toeti Heraty—penyair kita yang baru saja berpuang—tidak ada keharuan. Aku, terutama, tidak menemukannya. Kalaupun masih tersisa keharuan, bentuknya menjadi lain sama sekali, tidak bisa kita hubungkan dengan model keharuan yang selama ini kita kenal dalam sajak para penyair laki-laki dalam lanskap puisi Indonesia modern.

Aku kira benar juga apa yang dikatakan A. Teeuw tentang puisinya: “Form and structure in each individual poems are simply made subordinate to the meaning of the poem as a whole.” Sebelumnya, “It lacks formalized rhyme and a regular line or stanza structure.” Puisinya tidak liris sama sekali. Selalu ada pembatalan akarn bentuk yang tertib atau bunyi yang sedap. Semua itu terdesak oleh semacam “ekspresi kebebasan”.


Ia membaca mata yang bisu.

Kemudian kami terbang-hinggap, terbang hinggap di dahan, dahan, awan, di belantara harapan.

Teringat mbak Toeti, teringat bergantian menyendok nasi gudeg di satu piring, diramaikan potongan tawa ngomongin lawan dan kawan, maka rasa gudeg tambah gurih.

Mbak Toeti sudah berangkat, entah kemana namanya, yang tidak tertera dalam peta, kakiku tertambat di tiang rumah menghindar sergapan corona.

teringat Mbak Toeti, teringat langkah pagi.

18 June 2021

Toeti Heraty – Keith Foulcher – Putu Oka Sukanta
Photo by Zoe Reynolds

Sekali lagi, Kawan Moer, keharuan pada puisi-puisi Toeti selalu dibatalkan atau diredam oleh semacam “kritik akan keharuan”.


Dengan semua itu, Toeti adalah penyair yang mahir mempermainkan kontras. Kritik mungkin tidak sepenuhnya diniatkan, tetapi dengan permainan kontras itu segala yang berwatak kritis muncul dengan sendirinya. Katakanlah, kritik hanya efek samping dari permainan kontras itu. Ini sedikit berbeda dari penyair-penyair yang terbebani oleh ideologi kiri, yang menjadikan kritik atau penyadaran pembaca sebagai tujuan utama.

Kubayangkan: Di sorga—semoga kelak Toeti bersemayam di sana—tidak akan kita temukan keindahan sebagaimana disyaratkan Kitab Suci. Terutama jika kita membaca laporan Toeti kelak.

(Zen Hae, zenhae@lontar.org)

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