LONTAR

Lontar Newsletter

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August 2022

Greetings from the ED

Indonesia's 77th anniversary of independence on August 17 was celebrated joyously throughout the nation, a welcome change from the somber Covid19-driven online commemorations of the past three years. Communities everywhere held colorful outdoor festivities, instilling a nationwide spirit of hope and optimism despite the threat of a looming global financial crisis.

If President Joko Widodo's state-of-the-union speech is to be believed, Indonesia has not done too badly these past 12 months. We have achieved self-sufficiency in rice production, managed the pandemic better than most countries and appear to be firmly on the road to recovery. Indeed, we are reminded of a few blessings in our favor: abundance in natural resources and a demographic bonus in which the productive age dominates the population structure. That said, let us not forget our shortcomings, specifically lingering problems of social injustice and inequality which urgently need to be addressed.

Education is another area in need of more attention and resources. Indonesian students consistently trail behind students of neighboring countries in PISA and TMSS tests (which evaluate their performance in science, mathematics and reading). Indonesian children today stand a better chance of obtaining an education than ever before yet, according to UNICEF statistics, about 4.3 million children and adolescents between the ages of 7 and 18 years still don't have access to education. Children of the very poor, children with disabilities, and children who live in remote or

Ruminations

Fences & Walls (#2 of 2)

Walk down any street in Jakarta—and I literally mean "walk down the street", because there's a dearth of sidewalks in this city—and you are bound to be surprised by the cost, labor, and ingenuity that have gone into the gates and fences shielding the sight of homes behind them in elite residential areas. Jakarta City Government Regulation No. 7 from 1991, governing height restrictions on fences in residential areas, states that a fence at the front of a property may be no higher than 1.5 meters and, if that high, the top half meter must be see-through — a regulation that is frequently ignored.

Fences and walls in an elite residential area of Jakarta.

Between 1979 and 1981, when pursuing my Master's degree at the University of Michigan, I was also working during academic breaks as an escort-interpreter for the U.S. Department of State. This involved helping the Department's Visitor Program Service (VPS) devise travel itineraries for Indonesians who had been invited to tour the U.S., greeting visitors upon their arrival, spending the next three or four weeks escorting them to wherever it is they're going, interpreting for them at scores of appointments, and (with almost no exceptions) finding restaurants where they could get their next meal of steamed rice—not always an easy feat in Small-town or even Medium-town, USA, four decades ago.

Visitors' trips always began in Washington, D.C., where courtesy

under-developed parts of the country are most at risk of being left behind. Geographically, out-of-school rates at junior-secondary school levels range from 1.3 per cent in Yogyakarta, a relatively affluent city, to 22 per cent in Papua, the country's easternmost and poorest province.

Other issues to be addressed include threats of radicalization, growing conservatism, and increased populism in schools. This is one good reason to support the call by the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology, Nadiem Makarim, to include the study of "Pancasila" as a full subject in what is known as the *Merdeka* ("freedom" or "independent") curriculum. It is, after all, the five principles of the national ideology that serve to bind this nation together.

Yayasan Lontar stands ready to support and work together towards the advancement of learning and literacy in Indonesia. *Merdeka*!

Yuli Ismartono (yismartono@lontar.org)

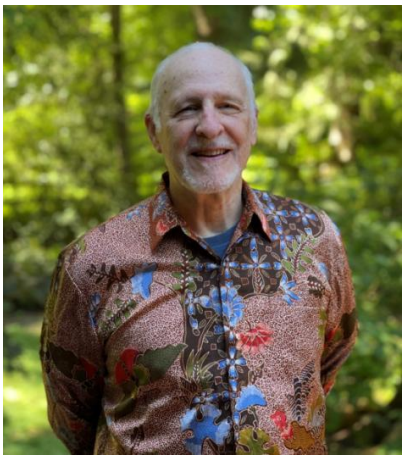
calls on government personnel and visits to museums were de rigueur. The next stop was usually New York City but, after that, other locations would have been determined by the visitors' fields of interest. Regardless of what these were, I always insisted on a visit to at least one rural location and because Madison, Wisconsin, is a leading center for Indonesian studies in the U.S., I was often able to include in their itineraries a visit to my family's home, just 1.5 hours from Madison, with stops at relatives' farms along the way.

From March 22 to April 21, 1981, I was assigned to escort and interpret for three "progressive and independent Muslim Indonesian intellectuals"—a favorite category of visitor for the Department of State which, while still providing strong support for the Soeharto government was also hedging bets that change might be somewhere around the corner. The three visitors I greeted at National Airport were Adi Sasono (1943–2016), a leading figure in the Islamic Students Association, (Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam) who, years later, would serve as Minister of Cooperatives and Small and Medium Enterprises during the Habibie presidency; Lukman Harun (1934–1999), whose last post in life was International Spokesperson for Muhammadiyah; and Said Budairy (1936–2009) a Nahdlatul Ulama leader and life-long journalist.

Indonesian visitors to the U.S. visit Glynnspring (left to right):
Said Budairy, Anna Marie McGlynn, John McGlynn Jr., Lukman Harun, JHM.

I can't remember all the stops on this particular trip but because after the trio's departure I would have to submit to the State Department a report on their impressions of the U.S., at their final stop I asked each of them what it was that had most struck them during their visit. What did they see as the greatest differences between Indonesia and the U.S. Said Budairy answered, "Old people's homes." Pak Said simply couldn't imagine an elderly Indonesian having to live in such a place. Lukman Harun told me, "Very few pregnant women." That was certainly true; I could count on my fingers the number of pregnant women I had seen in our 30 days together—a fact that spoke to distinctive differences in attitudes towards birth control and reproductive rights between the two countries. Adi Sasono, the last to offer his view, stated "No walls! No fences!" An astute answer, I thought, because except in the wealthiest

Translator of the Month



GEORGE A. FOWLER began studying Malay and Chinese in 1970 at Nanyang University in Singapore. He moved to Indonesia in 1971 to co-author *Pertamina: Indonesian National Oil*, a book project that took him from Sumatra to Papua. Subsequently, from 1973 to 1975, in between semesters at the University of Toronto, he returned to Indonesia to do field research for *Java: A Garden Continuum*, essays on Java's culture and history, another co-authorship. For the next 24 years he was a commerical banker throughout the Asia-Pacific region, with a good deal of this time spent in Indonesia.

In 2002, with an MA in International Studies from the University of Washington, George began a second career as a freelance commercial translator of Indonesian, Chinese, Malay, and Tagalog and as an Indonesian interpreter. He began literary translation of Indonesian and Chinese in 2009 with the publication in 2011 of *Sitti Nurbaya* (by Marah Roesli) and *Old Town* (by Lin Zhe). Since then, he has translated translated 15 other works of fiction, non-fiction and poetry from these two languages, including *Islam, Humanity, and the Indonesian Identity: Reflectons on History* by the late Ahmad Syafii Maarif. He and his wife Scholastica live in Woodinville, Washington, USA.

areas of the cities we visited, fences and walls around homes were a rarity.

In this "Rumination" on the subject of "fences and walls" (and that of the previous month as well) what is it I've been thinking about? What have I been trying to say? I believe it's the same point of view eloquently expressed in Robert Frost's 1914 poem, "Mending Walls." In that poem, Frost tells of two rural neighbors who have a stone wall that separates their properties and every spring, it is their tradition to walk the wall together and jointly make repairs. The speaker in the poem, perhaps Frost himself, sees no reason for the wall and hints as much to his neighbor but the neighbor repeats for him an old adage, "Good fences make good neighbors." To himself, however, the speaker asks:

Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.

According to some critics, this poem expresses the need for clear boundaries between properties as well as the need for neighbors to respect these boundaries. Only in this way will relationships remain amicable and good. Perhaps that is so but given that few readers of poetry are likely to give much thought to rural fences but that most people are very much concerned with lines on map and the division between "what is mine" and "what is yours," it is more likely that Frost's "fences" are an allegory for the physical and mental walls many of us build to separate ourselves from others—barriers that are both regressive and offensive in any society that purportedly adheres to the principles of equality and egalitarianism.

Yes, there are sometimes very good reasons for building fences—to keep cows in or out, being just one—but as Frost notes in his poem, before a person constructs a wall, he or she might reflect on the following:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.

From time immemorial it seems humans have been building walls. Construction of the Great Wall of China began in northern China in the 7th century BCE and continued for two millennia until it reached 5,500 miles in length. The wall did little to prevent invasions; in the early 13th century, for instance, Genghis Khan and his Mongolian army easily breached the barrier. Such was also the case with the Hadrian wall in northwestern Britain whose construction, beginning in 122 CE, was built to protect Romans against the barbarians. Think, too, about more recent examples: the Berlin Wall and the U.S.-Mexico Border Wall. What do they stand for? Is it protection and security or might it be, perhaps, an irrational fear of "the other"?

John McGlynn (john_mcglynn@lontar.org)

Author of the Month

Marah Rusli

Marah Roesli was born in Padang, West Sumatra, on August 7, 1889. He was educated at a Dutch-medium school in Padang and thereafter at the influential Raja's School in Bukittinggi. Upon graduation in 1910, he entered the government-run Veterinary School and, after graduation, commenced his lifelong career in veterinary service.

In 1911, Marah Roesli married a woman from Bogor, West Java, Nyai Raden Ratna Kecana Wati. Although this marriage was against his parents' wishes, it proved to be a happy and lasting one that produced three children.

In his role as a writer, in 1926 Marah Roesli co-authored the first report on *Lepora bubalorum*, a form of leprosy in water buffalo found only in Indonesia but it is for his fictional work that he is well known. In addition to *Sitti Nurbaya*, he also wrote two other works of fiction, but neither of these is generally considered an equal to *Sitti Nurbaya*. First published in 1928, *Sitti Nurabay*a is still in print today and has been translated into several foreign languages.

In the history of Indonesian literature, H.B. Jassin, the preeminent Indonesian literary critic, named Marah Roesli the first modern Indonesian novelist. He died in Bandung in 1968.

Surat dari Pejompongan

Marah

Kawan Moer,

Ketika bersekolah dulu, pernahkah kau membaca *Sitti Nurbaya* karya Marah Roesli? Aku belum sempat, baru belakangan. Jika kau pernah membacanya, bagus juga, biar aku bisa berbagi cerita tentang roman ini. Aku agak tergelitik karena roman ini adalah roman karya generasi Balai Pustaka yang paling populer. Konon, saking populernya, roman ini lebih sering dibaca sinopsisnya, ketimbang teks aslinya, oleh anak SMA.

Sitti Nurbaya dianggap sebagai roman pemula dalam sastra Indonesia. Zuber Usman mengatakan begitu. Kebaruannya dalam bentuk telah membuat roman ini menjadi pemula, juga karena muatan temanya yang menggugat adat. Jadi, sastra dalam konteks *Sitti Nurbaya* adalah suara pengarang dalam memodernisasi kehidupan masyarakat pembaca. Ia mengkritik aspek-aspek buruk adat (kawin paksa dan poligami), tetapi pada saat yang sama juga mengusung mentalitas amtenar.

Marah Roesli sebenarnya belum beranjak jauh dari kecenderungan karya sastra di masa pergerakan atau roman yang ditulis dengan dasar budaya tertentu—dalam hal ini: Minangkabau. Dua tokoh utama roman ini—Sitti Nurbaya dan Samsulbahri—sangat modern. Mereka bersekolah Belanda dan berpakaian sebagaimana anak-anak Belanda atau Indo-Belanda. Mereka adalah agen modernitas yang tengah melanda anak-anak muda di Hindia Belanda saat itu.

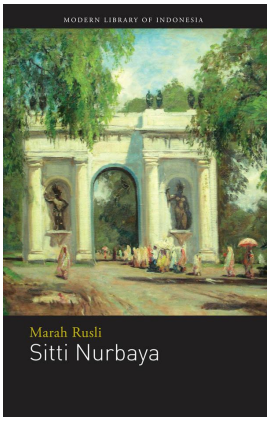
Namun, pengarang tidak ingin "membelandakan" mereka sepenuhnya—sebaliknya, Abdul Muis membelandakan sekaligus menghukum Hanafi dalam *Salah Asuhan*. Meski modern, Samsu dan Nurbaya masih bersetia kepada adat. Saat berkasih-kasihan, misalnya, mereka masih berbalas pantun. Mereka juga menerima kawin paksa—dan menolaknya di kemudian hari. Dan pembalasan dendam adalah jalan penyelesaian untuk semua konflik yang tidak selesai. Orang berbunuhan dengan berbagai sebab dan tokoh-tokoh penting dimatikan di akhir cerita.

Gaya pelukisan roman ini sangat realistik-naturalistik—cenderung bertele-tele ketika melukiskan rupa dan karakter tokoh atau lanskap tertentu. Pengarang benar-benar ingin melukis serealistik mungkin dengan kata-kata bahasa Indonesia yang masih dibebani langgam Melayu-Minangkabau.

Belum lagi pretensi moralistik yang menghakimi karakter. Tokoh antagonis macam Datuk Meringgih harus dijembrengkan kejahatannya dan bagaimana seharusnya ia bersikap baik di dunia. Pengarang berkhotbah melalui Samsu tentang keburukan watak Meringgih—dan itu dilakukan menjelang kematian si tokoh.

Book of the Month

Sitti Nurbaya



By Marah Rusli

Translated by George A. Fowler

First published in 1922, the novel *Sitti Nurbaya: A Love Unrealized*, by Marah Rusli, retains the poignancy that made it a modern Indonesian classic. Written in formal Malay, *Sitti Nurbaya* touches on the themes of colonialism, forced marriage, and modernity. Well-received upon publication, *Sitti Nurbaya* continues to be taught in Indonesian high schools.

In terms of its social impact in what was then the Dutch East Indies, *Sitti Nurbaya* may be compared to Uncle Tom's Cabin in the ante-bellum United States. Even to this day, the issues of injustice and indignities suffered by women that this novel raised continue to be debated throughout the country.

Rich in description, dense with ironic foreboding and the inexorable workings of fate, *Sitti Nurbaya* is Samsu and Sitti Nurbaya's ill-fated love story. But in their wishes, the reader might also also discern young people's tantalizing dream of what the East Indies society might become, or could become, if only local genius, embodied in a modernizing youth emancipated from stifling traditions, could fuse with European genius in mutual respect and admiration. This too was, of course, a dream never to be realized, and one perhaps which never could have been realized.

Namun, ada juga yang menarik. Bagaimana, misalnya, Samsulbahri menyatakan cinta kepada Sitti Nurbaya. Selama ini, kita menyangsikan aspek kelangsungan pengungkapkan cinta orang Indonesia. Kata-kata seperti "I love you"—yang lumrah bagi penutur berbahasa Inggris—dianggap tidak cocok untuk menyatakan cinta orang Indonesia. Kukira baru pada roman inilah—pada seratus tahun lalu—orang Indonesia bisa mengatakan apa yang menjadi terjemahan "I love you": "Ketahuilah olehmu, Nur, bahwa aku ini sangat cinta kepadamu," kata Samsul Bahri.

Mungkin Zuber Usman berlebihan ketika membandingkan kebaruan bentuk *Sitti Nurbaya* dengan ragam cerita lama dan hikayat Melayu. Aku kira, ia mesti dibandingkan dengan roman sezamannya; dengan *Student Hidjo* karya Mas Marco Kartodikromo yang terbit empat tahun sebelumnya.

Student Hidjo adalah "bacaan liar" yang ditulis oleh pengarang nasionalis kiri. Sementara *Sitti Nurbaya* masuk ke dalam rengkuhan Balai Pustaka: moralis, menjunjung bahasa Melayu, tidak ada seks dan perlawanan politik—jika pun ada mesti ditumpas. Tetapi, karena *Student Hidjo* terbit di luar Balai Pustaka, ia bisa lebih luwes dan berani. Soal pergaulan bebas pemuda Jawa dengan pemudi Belanda, misalnya.

Jika bahasa Indonesia *Sitti Nurbaya* terasa lambat dan berbunga-bunga, *Student Hidjo* sebaliknya, sangat tangkas, lugas dan tanpa bunga-bunga kata—penuh serapan bahasa Belanda pula. Mungkin karena *Student Hidjo* pada mulanya dimuat sebagai cerita bersambung di *Sinar Hindia* penataan paragraf dan bab-babnya sangat ringkas. Peralihan cerita sangat cepat, tetapi pada saat yang sama jadi seperti sinopsis.

Mas Marco kurang sabar menata bentuk, sementara Marah Roesli asyik berkisah dengan langgam yang mendayu-dayu. Apakah sebagai roman Balai Pustaka ia tidak bisa mengkritik? Bisa juga. Tengoklah bagaimana Datuk Meringgih menyebut Samsulbahri sebagai "anjing Belanda" karena ia menjadi opsir Belanda yang bertugas menumpas kerusuhan perkara belasting di Padang.

Ah, aku juga tidak sabar, kawan, untuk menuntaskan suratku ini. Lain kali kusambung ya. Ciao!

Zen Hae, (zenhae@lontar.org)

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