



# Lontar Newsletter

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November, 2024

## Greetings from the ED

True to his campaign promise, President Prabowo Subianto is making education a top priority in his government agenda. At an event commemorating National Teachers Day on November 28, attended by hundreds of teachers from Indonesia's 38 provinces and regions, the president announced that teachers' salaries would be increased by 100 percent. This will be covered by a Rp82.6 trillion (US\$5.21billion) state budget allocated for the education sector, the biggest in the nation's history. The announcement evoked an emotional response from the teachers, many who felt they were finally getting a long overdue attention and recognition from the government. The president stressed that national prosperity was intrinsically linked to effective educational practices, with teachers serving as the critical determinant of educational success. As such, he is committed to improving the quality of the country's 806,486 teachers through a special education program. Starting in 2025, teachers who have not held at least a diploma 4 (D4) or bachelor's degree (S1) will be given educational assistance to continue their studies.

Another announcement which evoked further applause involved the government's commitment to allocate Rp17.15 trillion (US\$1 billion) to rehabilitate, repair and renovate 10,440 public and private schools. Unlike previous budgetary policies, these funds will be sent directly to the schools by direct cash transfer and the schools are expected to self-manage the funds without interference from other governmental offices.

## Ruminations

V.S.

If I were to try counting the number of dinners, cocktail parties, soirées, and receptions I have hosted in the decades since moving into my home in Jakarta in 1983, I doubt if I could, at least not now when long-past years have fused together and no longer constitute units of 365 days but have become amorphous spans of time with no certain beginning or end, much less individual months, weeks, or days. Even so, there are some gatherings which, like a good port, are "V.S."

My home today is not the one it was in 1995. At that time, before its total reconstruction in 2002, there was no dining room, just a combined living-dining area with a round table at one end which could seat only six diners comfortably. This presented a minor problem in mid-August when I hosted a dinner for Vidiadhar Surajprasad "V.S." (or "Vidhya") Naipaul, the Trinidadian-born author who was, by that time, a British "Sir" but not yet the Nobel-prize recipient he became in 2001. Even so, he was already well known internationally, Indonesia included, amongst the literati, at least, possibly due to his 1979 novel, *A Bend in the River*, which marked the beginning of the author's explorations into "native" historical traditions but likely more so because of his 1981 non-fiction publication, *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*. In the latter title, which he began to write after the Iranian Revolution, he delves into the subject of "indigenous culture" in countries where Islamic fundamentalism was then on the rise: Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia, countries where, he argues, Islam was not "native"—as if ignoring the obvious question of whether Christianity and other religions are "indigenous" faiths in the countries where they are now dominant.

I can't remember who it was that contacted me in mid-1995, asking me to help arrange a tour for Naipaul who was planning a trip to Indonesia to conduct research for a sequel to *Among the Believers* (which had become one of his most popular works). It may have been PEN New York, the Association of American Publishers, or any one of a number of other human-rights related groups I had previously assisted in the past but it may very well have been the author's agent; I'm not sure. Regardless of the go-between, on the first night of the author's arrival in Jakarta I met the author for dinner at the newly opened Regent Jakarta, a hotel that "set new standards of luxury in Indonesia," whose single rooms were

These promises notwithstanding, the education sector still faces a mountain of challenges, primarily regarding the recruitment of teachers. Recent investigations exposed school administrators in complicity with local government officials charging applicants with ‘extra fees’ to be accepted without the appropriate qualifications. Indonesia currently has 1.93 million certified teachers, representing 64.4 percent of the country’s teaching workforce with shortages in schools in rural and remote areas. “We acknowledge the challenges and shortcomings that persist but we are determined, committed and we recognize that education is what we must improve,” Mr Prabowo said, emphasizing that education is key to overcoming poverty.

Also in regard to changes in governmental policies, on the evening of November 27, at the opening of Jakarta Content Week (JakTent) and the Jakarta International Literary Festival (JILF) Mr. Fadli Zon, head of the newly-established Ministry of Culture, emphasized in his opening speech the importance of promoting knowledge of Indonesian literature abroad as a key to improved international relations. We couldn’t agree more!

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Sitor Situmorang and V.S. Naipaul

more than twice the size of my home’s two bedrooms combined.

“Call me Vidhya,” he said, when we met at the hotel’s ground-floor coffee shop. A woman was with him whom he introduced not by her name, which I later came to know as Margaret Murray Gooding, but as “my mistress.” This was a “cringe moment” for me, one followed in swift succession by another when he glibly told me that his wife was in hospital with cancer. Not bad enough, at the outset of our dinner together, he three times berated the waiter for bringing to the table bottles of white wine that were, for him, too cold to drink—not willing to wait, apparently, for the wine to warm to a consumable temperature.

When discussing with Vidhya his plans for the days to come, he asked me (and I offered) to host a dinner for him at my home. I presumed that meant for Margaret as well but I couldn’t say for sure as she seemed to have no say in any matter and barely uttered a single word the entire evening. There were a number of people Vidhya wanted to meet, first and foremost among them the poet Sitor Situmorang who had been, oddly enough (given that he was of Batak-Christian descent), one of Vidhya’s primary informants on Islamic culture in Indonesia when he was doing research for *Among the Believers*.

Because Sitor was a friend and we were in the middle of working on a collection of his poetry which Lontar would publish the following year, he was easy to invite. So, too, was Goenawan Mohamad, a co-founder of Lontar and (former) editor of *Tempo*, the weekly news magazine the government had banned the year before. (I thought that the incident as well as President Soeharto’s manipulation of Islamic groups over the years might lead to an interesting discussion.)

With Vidhya, Margaret, Sitor, Goenawan, and myself we had five people for my six-seat dining table so I solved the minor problem cited above by borrowing a neighbor’s double-leaf dining table, thereby increasing the seating capacity to ten, allowing me to invite as well, Suzanne Siskel (Ford Foundation Representative), Eugene Galbraith (President-Director of ABN-AMRO Securities), news journalist and author Leila S. Chudori, poet and essayist Nirwan Dewanto, and Sidney Jones (Asia Director at Human Rights Watch). The last-named guest was

## FEATURED AUTHOR



Acep Zamzam Noor

Acep Zamzam Noor is a poet and painter who writes both in Indonesian and Sundanese. His first prize for his poetry came in 2000 from the National Language Center of the Department of Education for a collection titled *Di Luar Kata* (Beyond Words) and in 2005 he was named recipient of the SEA-Write Award for Indonesia by the royal government of Thailand. In 2006 the government of West Java bestowed on him its highest award in the field of culture and in 2007 the Minister of Culture and Tourism awarded him a gold medal for his essays on culture that were published in the mass media. Also in 2007, his Indonesian-language collection titled *Menjadi Penyair Lagi* (A Poet Once More) garnered for him the Khatulistiwa Literary Award for poetry, Indonesia's most esteemed literary award. He won this same award again for his 2013 collection titled *Bagian dari Kegembiraan* (A Part of Joy) which also won for him first prize for best poetry collection on National Poetry Day that year. On National Poetry Day in 2017, he won first prize again, this time for his collection title *Berguru Kepada Rindu* (Lessons from Longing). His 2011 Sundanese-language collection titled *Paguneman* (Conversations) was the recipient of the Rancagé Literary Award, a literary award specifically given to works in several of the regional languages of Indonesia.



Sidney Jones and Suzanne Siskel

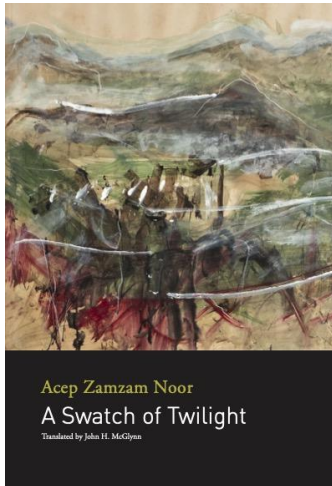
(and still is) one of the world's preeminent experts on radical Indonesian Islam.

All in all, the combined knowledge among guests about Indonesian culture and Indonesian Islam was immense and I was looking forward to a mentally-stimulating dinner-table debate on the author's central thesis in *Among the Believers* i.e., that Islam is a form of Arab imperialism that destroys other cultures.

The evening did prove to be thought-provoking but not in the way just mentioned. After pre-prandial drinks, hors d'oeuvres, and small talk on the back terrace, I ushered the guests to the dining table. By this time, no introductions were necessary, so I straightway raised a glass of not-too-cold white wine to the distinguished author and all other guests. Dinner then proceeded nicely but was not marked by a hearty exchange of ideas. I waited for a serving of that to come with dessert and digestifs but, again, there were no voices raised, with all ten people at the dining table vying to make their opinion known, and no kind of contretemps either (which I had secretly been looking forward to). In fact, the discussion was muted because Vidhya almost completely ignored the women at the table, just as he had with Margaret on that first night at the Regent, never initiating a conversation with any of them; succinctly answering what questions they asked, perhaps, but never going further, instead very obviously addressing his questions to the men at the table and seeking their advice.

Four years later, when the results of Naipaul's research trip came out in book form, his publisher sent me a copy. As I studied the book's cover, I recalled that evening at my home, then shook my head when reading the book's title: *Beyond Belief*. Very appropriate, I thought if in regard to that evening about then I also thought how labeling is sometimes deceptive and what might be "V.S." for one person might not be "Very Special" for others.

John McGlynn ([john\\_mcglynn@lontar.org](mailto:john_mcglynn@lontar.org))



The poet Acep Zamzam Noor is a faithful bearer of what is known in Indonesian poetics as “silent songs” whose language is especially distinct from the bureaucratized-sounding language of the mass media. His poems are a kind of wrapper for silence containing images of death and failure. Beauty is transitory, something that quickly passes, and while poetry may attempt capture it, the effort will be futile.

Nonetheless, and as if even silence has a due-date, in Acep’s more recent poems he has allowed—even “invited”—noise and pollution to enter his poems. Irony, however, changes into a darkly bitter chastisement of the self. Acep appears to intentionally create a tension between lyricism and jargon so that we readers can take our own stance in the “democratic fiesta” that so frequently invites chaos instead.

But even as he tries to address the socio-political world around him, Acep’s poems are still anti-heroic. So it is, for instance, that his subtle eroticism (where the “I” in a poem is often harassed by his lover) is an alternative to the political machismo which is, by nature, corrupt. Or when his poems are playful or full of mischievous, it as if this mischievous is a challenge of equal force to the State’s arbitrariness and injustice.

## Surat dari Pejompongan

### KOKOH

Kawan Moer,

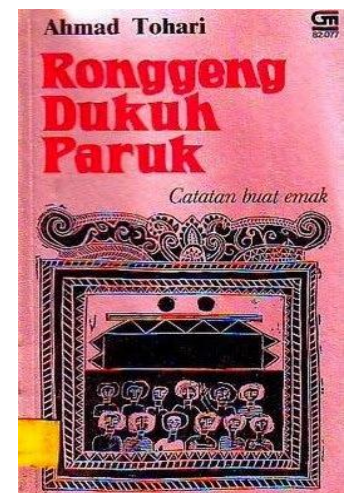
Realisme dalam sastra sering kali dianggap sebagai salinan dari kenyataan hidup sehari-hari. Pengarang, dalam hal ini, adalah penyalin yang kemudian memindahkan seraya mengolah kembali hasil salinan kenyataan itu menjadi karya sastra. Sebagai sebuah hasil salinan, apakah sastra dan kenyataan yang mengilhaminya itu sama atau berbeda? Ada selisihnya, ternyata.

Dalam membaca karya sastra—terlebih-lebih yang realis—tidak jarang kita menggunakan pengalaman membaca atau mengalami langsung kehidupan sebagai acuan dalam menilai. Kita mencocokkan pengetahuan kita tentang kenyataan dengan representasinya dalam karya sastra di tangan kita. Saat itu, kita tidak benar-benar bisa meninggalkan pengetahuan kita tentang dunia nyata dalam memasuki karya sastra sebagai dunia fiktif—tidak akan pernah. Jika ada selisih di antaranya, di situlah muncullah kritik.

Terkait ini aku jadi teringat kritik F. Rahardi untuk novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (Gramedia, 1982) karya Ahmad Tohari. Ketika terbit novel itu mendapatkan sambutan positif dari para pengamat sastra. Terutama karena novel ini dinilai punya kekuatan dalam menampilkan alam perdesaan di Jawa Tengah dan bagaimana seni dan seniman tradisi tumbuh dan bertahan dari gerusan zaman. Sebuah novel realis yang kuat dalam tema, penokohan dan pelukisan latar waktu dan tempat.

Namun, tanggapan kritis juga ada. Jika sempat, bolak-baliklah majalah *Horison* edisi Januari 1984 yang memuat esai Rahardi yang berjudul “Cacat Latar yang Fatal”. Di situ Rahardi menelanjangi *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* sebagai novel yang penuh cacat dalam pelukisan alam dan manusia. Mulai dari kerokot, alap-alap, kodok, kelelawar, hingga singkong beracun, cara makan elang dan lampu penerang pertunjukan ronggeng yang, menurut Rahardi, di sana-sini ada kesalahan pelukisannya.

Dalam hal ini, Rahardi mengambil posisi serupa guru biologi dan sejarah atau pengalam kehidupan perdesaan yang kawakan. Ia menuding Tohari sebagai kurang akrab dengan lingkungannya. Di akhir tulisannya, Rahardi menyimpulkan, dengan segala kecerobohnya itu Ahmad Tohari sebaris dengan sastrawan Indonesia lainnya yang “umumnya mau cepat melejit lalu hantam kromo begitu saja.”



## A POEM

### I Want to Be With You

I want to be with you when you go home  
tonight  
To take the city bus and to be crushed  
together with you inside  
I want to be with you at the next stop  
And then a kilometer more, where you  
disembark at the police station  
To wait for the next mini-bus. I want be with  
you, arms scrunched  
Inside the stuffy van, as we go past several  
intersections  
Cross over so many railroad tracks, go under  
overpasses  
Pass through tunnels until we are caught in a  
jam  
Near the terminal. I want to be with you when  
you sigh deeply  
Take out a tissue to lap the sweat on your  
forehead and neck  
I want to be with you when you emerge from  
that ramshackle vehicle  
Walk alongside to the motorbike-taxi stand. I  
want to be with you  
As you traverse the potholed path, cut through  
winding alleyways  
To the place you rent with the front ground  
filled with laundry racks  
I want to be with you when you open the door,  
go into your room  
Take off your shoes, remove your clothes and  
throw them  
Beside the couch. I want to be with you when  
you turn on the fan  
Then take a swallow of cold water. I want to  
be with you  
When you turn on the television, smoke a  
joint, and watch a blue film  
I want to be with you when you fiddle with  
the silence in your room

Acep Zamzam Noor, 2007

Dua bulan setelah itu muncul tanggapan balik dari Tohari di *Horison*, Maret 1984. Judulnya “Kecongkakan Akademik dalam Kritik Sastra” dengan anak judul “Salam buat Pak Guru Biologi”. Tohari membela pendiriannya sebagai pengarang dan menuduh Rahardi sebagai terlalu bersikap hitam-putih dalam menilai novelnya itu. Tohari menggunakan pengalamannya sebagai orang desa yang mengalami langsung denyut kehidupan perdesaan yang kemudian ia ampelas dan tampilkan kembali dalam karya sastra.

Rahardi kemudian menanggapi esai Tohari itu dengan esai “Hantam Kromo yang Bikin Keqi” di *Horison*, Mei 1984. Di situ ia masih menyerang Tohari yang dianggapnya kurang teliti dan jeli dalam menulis fiksi, setelah memujinya sebagai penulis yang menguasai teknik-teknik dasar menulis prosa. Hingga menimbrunglah seorang penulis dari Riau, Fakhrunnas M.A. Jabbar yang menulis esai “Mencari Realitas dalam Karya Sastra” di *Horison*, Agustus 1984. Ia memberi maaf atas cacat latar dalam *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* yang menurutnya tidaklah fatal.

Bung, membaca kembali lalu lintas esai-esai semacam ini aku merasa memang ada waktunya kita harus menanggalkan segala “kecongkakan akademis” kita dalam memasuki karya sastra. Bukan untuk memaafkan kesalahan-kesalahan penulisan, tetapi untuk lebih rela dalam menikmati semesta fiksi. Kukira penting juga melihat fiksi sebagai dunia yang memberi kenikmatan rohani—ketika kita tidak mendapatkannya dari yang lainnya.

Tetapi, memang, kerelaan mengalami semesta fiksi itu setidaknya harus didukung oleh semacam bangunan semesta fiksi yang kuat. Aku jadi ingat kata-kata Rachel Cusk saat diwawancara *Paris Review* yang jika diterjemahkan jadi begini: “Menulis fiksi adalah seperti mendirikan bangunan yang jika kau tidak ada di dalamnya, bangunan itu akan tetap berdiri kokoh.”

Kukira Rachel benar, pada karya sastra yang kuat, pengarangnya tidak bakal diminta untuk bertanggung jawab. Karya itu telah otonom. Ia menjadi kuat dengan sendiri—tapi tidak mudah mencapai kualitas karya yang seperti itu, Kawan. Betul toh?! **Zen Hae** ([zenhae@lontar.org](mailto:zenhae@lontar.org))

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