



# Lontar Newsletter

Email: [contact@lontar.org](mailto:contact@lontar.org)

April, 2025

## Greetings from the ED

Commemoration of Kartini Day this year held special significance for the women's rights movement in Indonesia. On April 11, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) officially recognized the collection of letters by Raden Ajeng Kartini as a world heritage documentary, inscribed in the Memory of the World Register. It was Kartini (April 21, 1879–September 17, 1904), a young Javanese noblewoman who in her letters, detailed her opposition to gender inequality and societal shackles, such as forced marriages, polygamy and the lack of education for women, setting in motion the struggle to achieve equal rights for women. Now, 120 years since her death at the age of 25, how are Indonesian women faring?

Undeniably, much progress has been achieved in the eight decades since independence. Indonesia's Global Gender Gap Index ranking improved from 92 in 2022 to 87 in 2023, including an increase in the share of women in legislative, senior, and management roles, from 29.7% in 2021 to over 30% today. However, due to socio-cultural interventions and remote geographical locations, progress has been far from even.

On an encouraging note, gender parity in education, has progressed incrementally. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the gender distribution of school-aged children has been relatively balanced. About 52% of primary school students are male and 48% are female. But in the workforce, women's participation is significantly below that of men—only 54.4% of the adult female population—and they are

## Ruminations

### A Cacophony of Sound

As mentioned in my "Rumination" of March 2025, when, in November 1982, I first met Hasyim Rachman and Joesoef Isak, two of the three co-founders of Hasta Mitra, we spoke of me translating the notes and letters of Pramoedya Ananta Toer dating from his time of exile on Buru Island. That, however, will not be the point of discussion in this "Rumination" because, beforehand, we spoke about the company's plans for a series of novels created by the author during his years of imprisonment.

Much has been written about the creation of that series, i.e., the "Buru Quartet," as it came to be known, but the version Pramoedya related to me is that long before his arrest and exile, he had done the basic research for the series and that on the night of his arrest, his research notes had been destroyed by his captors in a bonfire outside his home. Thus, when on Buru he feared he would never be able to write his imagined stories, to keep them alive in his mind, he narrated them to his fellow prisoners.

In 1969, four years after his arrest, when he was finally permitted to write again, these same prisoners took on extra labor so as to reduce the author's workload and give him more time to write. And write he did, in single space, with narrow margins, and with multiple carbon copies to better ensure that of the copies smuggled from the island, at least one might survive.

After Pramoedya's release from Buru in December 1979, it was these copies, plus another one (bravely transported from Buru by another political prisoner), which allowed the author to produce final drafts of the quartet (and other titles as well) in a relatively short space of time. Hasta Mitra had published the first novel in the series, *Bumi Manusia (This Earth of Mankind)* in 1981; critical acclaim and unprecedented sales had given the company's founders enough



Pramoedya on Buru Island with a fellow prisoner, the artist A. Gumelar.

mostly in more menial jobs. In the entrepreneurial world, 64% of adult women fall into that category but they mostly operate micro-scale businesses.

Where women could play a more significant role in bringing changes would be in the public sphere. There are no legal barriers to women's participation in politics and government, and while their numbers are increasing, they are still low. Women's representation in the legislature currently stands at 21.9% and while political parties have mostly adhered to nominating 30 percent women as the law requires, fewer women are voted in than men.

One area where Indonesian women shine today is in the literary field. This list includes Dewi Lestari (Dee), Ayu Utami, Ika Natasa, Leila S. Chudori, Intan Paramaditha, Okky Madasari, Laksmi Pamuntjak, Marchella FP and many more. Lontar has consistently given voice to women's concerns through the translation and publication of their literary work and is proud to have worked with many of these talented women authors.



Yuli Ismartono ([yismartono@lontar.org](mailto:yismartono@lontar.org))

confidence to rent commercial office space and to move Hasta Mitra from the back rooms of Joesoef's home on Jl. Duren Tiga to Senen Market, in Central Jakarta. (Sadly, because of the vindictiveness of the Soeharto government, this period of elation and rental of space at Pasar Senen did not last long.)

Now, coming back to this "Rumination," I told Hasyim and Joesoef of my desire "to help with" the translation the quartet. (If one could

speak straightforwardly in Indonesian, I would have told them point-blank I wanted to translate the books.) Hasyim told me that Ben Anderson had, in fact, suggested my name as a translator but before he'd been able to track me down, an "Australian man" had come to him with a draft translation in hand. And because he wanted to get that first book into English a.s.a.p., he was going to go with that man's translation.

"Like a bird in the bush," I might have muttered but replied instead, "I understand."

Perhaps as a sop to me when seeing my disappointment, Hasyim then began to talk about the hundreds of pages of letters and notes Pramoedya had produced on Buru, which sympathizers had also smuggled from the island. At this point, Joesoef interjected that they planned to call the collection *Nyanyian Seorang Bisu*. He may have shrugged when adding that the MS was far from ready for publication.

I opened my eyes wider in query, to which Joesoef responded that these "hundreds of pages" were only just now being collected. Thus, not knowing how long it would be before the Indonesian title would be published yet anxious to do something to help, I asked if there was anything else we might consider trying to bring into print beforehand.

"Maybe a collection of short stories," Joesoef ventured. "Quite a few have already been translated."

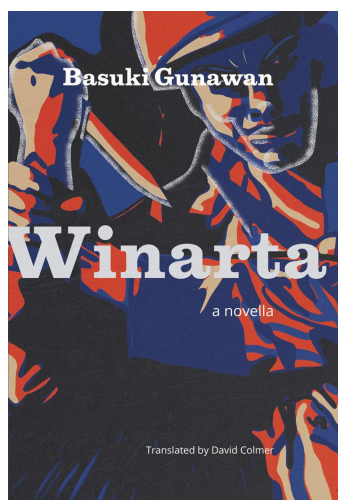
That was true. As an undergraduate student seven years previously, I had gathered as many Indonesian shortstories in English translation as I could find and had typed up all of them. Since that time, more had been published in English. Hooray, I thought. I now had a project and was naively confident of being able to put together an English language anthology of Pramoedya's short stories in little time.

Of course, "little time" in the early 1980s was much longer in duration than it is today when, with access to the internet, one can readily find most anything one is looking for with the input of just a few key words. "Little time" in Indonesia 1982, when libraries were few,



First edition cover of *Bumi Manusia*

## FORTHCOMING



Set during the Indonesian revolution, *Winarta* reflects the brutality of that period, but is also tinged with post-war existentialism and the search for purpose.

Winarta, an Indonesian medical student with artistic ambitions, is convalescing from a bout of TB when he receives news that his parents have been killed by the Dutch colonial forces. Initially he assumes that his parents must have been involved in the independence struggle and had risked their lives knowingly, but when he finds out that their cruel murders were a case of mistaken identity, he swears revenge and joins an anti-colonial militia. Winarta pursues his goal single-mindedly, gaining a reputation for fearlessness and brutality, but finds no satisfaction and discovers that he is too changed to go back to a life of peace. Instead he seeks death in a reckless raid on an enemy munitions depot. This leads to arrest and imprisonment and it is from his jail cell that Winarta tells the story of his parents, his decision, his relationships with women, and his disillusionment. The tone is factual, at times almost laconic, registering horrors with fatal detachment.

The novella reminds one of *The Outsider* by Albert Camus, but contrasts with that novel in that it is not an alienated colonist who is speaking here, but one of the colonized.

public access to information was limited, and all literary work by Pramoedya was on the “No Read List,” meant that it would be more than two years before I had managed to collect and transcribe translations of more than 20 of Pramoedya’s translated stories.

Then the editing work and snail-mail correspondence with translators began.....

Among Pramoedya’s stories which had been published in English was a handful with multiple versions in English. Two were “Inem” and “Yang Sudah Hilang,” with three versions for each, all translated by reputable scholars. Which of these would I choose?

Looking only at the stories’ English titles, for the story, “Inem” (a girl’s name), there was no variance. All three English-language versions were titled “Inem” but “Yang Sudah Hilang,” whose literal translation might be “That which is Lost,” one version was titled “Things Vanished,” another “Vanished Childhood,” and the third, “Lonely Paradise.” Hmm....

As it was with titles, so too it was with texts. All were different—in some places, very different. Then I began to look at the other stories, those with just one English-language version. And so it was with them as well, I found in each a different voice. For every translation by a different translator, a different voice.

Another issue that came to the fore was that the translators were of different nationalities: British, American, and Australian. How can you have “mum” in one story but “mom,” “mother,” “momma,” or “mam” in others. “Toilet” in one but “restroom” or “bathroom” in others. What’s it going to be—“flat” or “apartment”; “forest” or “woods”; “biscuits” or “cookies”; “sweets,” “lollies,” or “candies”; “lorry” or “truck”; “holiday” or “vacation”?

All this is not to mention the different translation strategies translators employed, with some opting for “domestication”—i.e., leaving no Indonesian words or concepts in place so as to make for greater target language “readability”—and others adopting a foreignization approach, retaining in their translations all Indonesian terms for which there were no true equivalents.

By this point, four years had passed and I came to see that the collection was a camel, a horse designed by committee, and, to mix metaphors, not a choir in which one voice complements the other but a cacophony of sound whose publication would do no service to the author’s reputation. For me, it was time to move on....

And move on I did. As much as I admired Pramoedya’s work and glowed in my friendship with Joesoef and Hasyim, I concluded that my days of working with the trio were past. But then I received a letter with an N.Y.C. return address (To be continued.)

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





BASUKI GUNAWAN was born in Banyumas, Central Java, 1929. During the Indonesian revolution, he joined the Student Army (Tentara Pelajar) to fight against the Dutch attempt to reinstate colonial rule. After hostilities ended in 1949 he was awarded a scholarship to study sociology in the Netherlands and travelled there in the early fifties as one of the first students from free Indonesia. During this period Gunawan wrote short stories and poetry in Indonesian, publishing them mostly in the magazine *Konfrontasi*. A bout of tuberculosis extended his stay in the Netherlands and it was during his stay in the Dutch Students' Sanatorium in 1953 that he wrote *Winarta* in Dutch. The novella received an honorary mention in the prestigious Reina Prinsen Geerligs Prize for unpublished manuscripts and was serialized in the progressive literary magazine *De Nieuwe Stem* but it was not until 2022 that the novella was rediscovered and published to critical acclaim in the Netherlands.

After regaining his health and completing his studies, Gunawan planned to return to Indonesia, but the tumultuous events of the mid-sixties and the installation of the Suharto regime convinced him to continue his career at the University of Amsterdam, where he went on to publish several academic books. He died in 2014.

## Surat dari Pejompongan

### FESTIVAL

Kawan Moer,

Dalam beberapa pekan terakhir ini, para peminat seni di negeriku—kaum penyair, lebih-lebih—sibuk menyongsong Hari Puisi Nasional yang jatuh pada 28 April. Mereka menggelar bukan hanya pembacaan puisi, tetapi juga musikalisasi, deklamasi hingga ceramah. Meski mereka menyebut Hari Puisi Nasional, sejatinya mereka merayakan Chairil Anwar, kepeloporan penyair ini pada puisi dan sastra Indonesia. Hari Puisi Nasional itu sendiri ditetapkan dengan mengacu kepada hari kematian sang penyair, 28 April 1949.

Kenapa harus hari kematian seorang penyair, bukan hari kelahirannya? Tenang, yang tidak setuju Hari Puisi Nasional boleh memilih Hari Puisi Indonesia yang diperingati setiap 22 Juni. Perayaan yang kedua ini diambil dari hari kelahiran Chairil Anwar pada tanggal itu di Medan 1922. Ini juga perayaan puisi Indonesia yang acuannya kurang-lebih sama, meski acaranya kadang-kadang sedikit berbeda. Ada sayembara atau penganugerahan buku puisi terbaik, misalnya.

Di Indonesia, orang-orang menghargai puisi kelewat tinggi, seakan-akan tidak ada yang lebih penting dari barang ciptaan yang satu ini. Bahkan, di kota asal orang tua Chairil Anwar, Payakumbuh, ada peristiwa sastra tahunan Payakumbuh Poetry Festival. Ada pula Forum Penyair ASEAN. Dahulu lebih-lebih lagi: mimbar penyair, penyair di depan forum, forum puisi, dan seterusnya, dan sebagainya. Merasa cerita pendek kurang diperhatikan, ada pula pihak yang mengadakan kongres cerpen.

Kini orang mulai sadar bahwa festival sastra itu bukan hanya untuk merayakan puisi, tetapi juga karya sastra yang lain; bukan hanya penulis tetapi juga pembaca sastra. Malah, sekarang ini ada pula festival yang memilih fokus lebih lebar, kepada budaya baca-tulis, yang disebut secara kekinian sebagai “festival literasi”. Semua itu adalah perayaan terhadap budaya tulisan, yang hari ini masih bertahan pada penulisan sastra.

Dalam festival sastra kita merayakan pencapaian-pencapaian terbaik dalam sastra. Dalam festival kita memajang bakat dan pilihan terbaik dari generasi sastra yang sedang tumbuh. Dengan festival kita bisa memastikan apakah sastra kita bergerak maju atau berjalan di tempat; meluas ke dunia atau hanya menjadi jago kampung belaka.

Pihak yang bertanggung jawab atas semua itu adalah dewan kurator, yang di masa lalu dianggap sebagai dewan pembaptis sastrawan, yang posisinya mirip dengan redaktur sebuah majalah sastra. *Horison*, maksudku. Mereka menentukan, mentahbiskan, hasil kerja kesastraan seseorang. Mana yang layak lolos ke tingkat nasional, mana yang hanya perlu menjadi kebanggaan daerah belaka.

Di negeri yang penuh kesemenjanaan macam Indonesia, tugas

## TRANSLATOR OF THE MONTH



David Colmer (Photo by Victor Schiferli)

DAVID COLMER is an Australian writer and the translator of more than eighty book-length works of Dutch-language literature. He works in a number of genres—mostly fiction, children’s literature and poetry—and has won several major awards for his translations, including the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize (precursor to the International Booker) and the International Dublin Literary Award (both with novelist Gerbrand Bakker) and the NSW Premier’s Translation Prize for his body of work. In 2021 he was presented with the James Brockway Prize for his translations of Dutch and Flemish poets such as Hugo Claus, Menno Wigman, Paul van Ostaijen and Cees Nooteboom. Notable recent translations include fiction by Willem Frederik Hermans, the poetry of Radna Fabias and Dutch children’s classics by Annie M.G. Schmidt. 2024 saw the publication of his co-translation (with David McKay) of David Van Reybrouck’s monumental *Revolusi: Indonesia and the Birth of the Modern World*. In addition to his own fiction, Colmer has written numerous articles about translation, is a frequent speaker at literary festivals and has led translation workshops in Belgium, the UK and the Netherlands. He lives in Amsterdam.

seorang kurator festival berat sekali. Sering kali mereka mesti memilih yang terbaik bukan dari sehimpunan yang terbaik, tetapi dari yang paling sedikit jeleknya (*minus malum*). Mereka harus memilih “yang terbaik” karena memang sudah disiapkan kursi bagi “yang terbaik”. Kursi itu tidak boleh kosong.

Posisi dilematis ini juga dialami oleh seorang redaktur sastra di media yang bertekad memajukan sastra Indonesia. Karya-karya sastra yang datang kepada dewan redaktur teramat banyaknya—terutama puisi dan fiksi—tetapi hanya sedikit, sedikit sekali, yang bermutu baik. Seorang kawanku yang sudah menghirup hampir seluruh isi dunia pernah mengatakan, “Indonesia ini negeri penyair, bukan negeri puisi.”

Kelewat banyak penulis, tetapi sedikit karya sastra bermutu, itulah masalah Indonesia. Ketika kerja penulisan sastra terasa jauh lebih mudah, para penulis sastra tumbuh di mana saja, tetapi yang kurang dari itu adalah kerja penyuntingan (*editorship*). Kita menghadapi kelewat banyak para penulis “hendak menjadi”, bukan penulis “betulan”. Atau, para penulis yang “merasa bisa”, bukan penulis yang “bisa merasa”.

Jika kedua yang terjadi, seorang penulis akan berhitung benar dengan karya-karyanya. Ia bekerja berdasarkan prinsip perbandingan. Ia membandingkan karya-karyanya bukan hanya dengan karya-karya lain yang terbaik dalam khazanah nasional, tetapi dengan karya-karya terbaik dari khazanah dunia. Prinsip perbandingan ini penting untuk dipegang oleh setiap penulis, sebab tanpa itu setiap penulis akan bekerja berdasarkan prinsip “asyik-asyik saja”. Dengan kata lain, tidak akan ke mana-mana.

Jika sebuah festival atau sayembara atau forum atau apa pun namanya bertekad untuk memilih yang terbaik, maka sang juru pilih harus bekerja keras untuk menemukan, paling tidak, mutiara dalam lumpur. Sementara para penulis mesti bekerja keras mencipta sebanyak mungkin Mutiara. Sebab tanpa itu semua, apalah gunanya kita menghabiskan usia di dunia yang serba-tidak nyaman ini, Bung? **Zen Hae** ([zenhae@lontar.org](mailto:zenhae@lontar.org))

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