



Lontar Newsletter

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Greetings

Indonesian literature today appears energetic and increasingly visible, buoyed by festivals, social media, and periodic breakthroughs in translation. Yet this visibility conceals a field under sustained pressure—market caution, moral scrutiny, and institutional gatekeeping—that shapes not only what is published, but what is written in the first place. Translation sits at the center of these tensions, functioning simultaneously as opportunity, filter, and arbiter of literary value.

The domestic publishing industry is small and risk-averse, operating on narrow margins and fragile distribution networks. Commercial genres dominate because they sell reliably. Literary fiction, poetry, and formally ambitious work tend to survive as prestige projects with limited print runs and brief shelf lives. For many writers, translation promises what the local market rarely provides: longevity, income, and recognition. That promise, however, increasingly shapes literary ambition itself.

Market pressure is intensified by a climate of moral policing. While formal state bans are now rare, informal censorship is pervasive. Publishers, booksellers, schools, and festivals routinely avoid work that could provoke protest or threaten distribution. Translation can offer a degree of insulation, granting controversial works legitimacy abroad, but it can also encourage writers to frame dissent in ways that are more legible—or palatable—to foreign audiences than to domestic ones.

The decline of literary criticism has

Ruminations

ytc

These days, the art of letter-writing seems to be a lost form of communication but not so in late 1976 when I first came to live in Jakarta. The used-book stalls at Pasar Senen (where I spent an inordinate percentage of my savings on literary titles) offered a wide variety of booklets and manuals on the subject. With foreign investment in Indonesia on a swift and upward climb at that time, a large percentage of these was devoted to business correspondence in English. (The following year, Djambatan Publishers of Jakarta contracted me to edit its money-making business-correspondence series.) The same kiosks also stocked a variety of manuals on the composition of condolence messages, love letters, and letters to friends.

If I wanted to impress a letter's recipient, I would then trot to Gunung Agung on Jalan Kramat, just 500 meters away, to purchase imported stationery and, after that, to the philatelic center in the post office on Jalan Cikini to buy commemorative postage stamps. No Soeharto postage stamps for me!

The main parts of a letter are the heading, the salutation, the message, the complimentary close, and the signature. These elements are fairly universal but in Indonesian letter-writing—at least in the days before SMS and WhatsApp—one had to pay special attention to the salutation. What was the position and social status of the letter's recipient and his or her relationship with you? Which honorific to use? Letter-recipients might be sorely offended if a letter to them had not been addressed in a way not to their liking—and then might intentionally neglect to reply.

For most formal correspondence, the proper way to address a recipient was, and still is, fairly clear—usually with “Yth” (*Yang terhormat* or “The Esteemed”) before the recipient's honorific and name. In informal correspondence, more options are available; these, however, usually follow the recipient's name. One is “yb” (*yang baik* or “good person”). Another is “ytc” (*yang tercinta* or “most loved”).

I first stepped foot in Indonesia on the evening of May 31, 1976. The next day, June 1, I flew to Surabaya and then made my way to Malang, where, for the next ten weeks, I participated in a program for the advanced study

further elevated translation's symbolic role. Print journals have disappeared, newspaper literary pages have shrunk, and sustained critical debate is scarce. In this vacuum, international recognition often substitutes for local critical validation. A book's value is increasingly confirmed by where it travels, not how it is read at home.

Language choice lies at the heart of this dynamic. Writing in Indonesian offers national reach but risks flattening regional voice and register; writing in local languages preserves specificity but sharply limits translatability and institutional support. Hybrid works that blend Indonesian with regional idioms pose additional challenges for translators and publishers. As a result, texts most likely to circulate internationally are often those that already conform to standardized linguistic expectations.

Translation itself is selective. Works chosen for foreign publication often align with external expectations of Indonesian literature—spiritual, ethnographic, or politically traumatic—while other modes, such as urban realism, linguistic experimentation, or quiet domestic narratives, circulate less widely. Over time, this selective visibility feeds back into domestic literary culture, shaping assumptions about what is worth writing.

These pressures do not signal a literature in decline, but one increasingly oriented toward outward legibility. The challenge ahead is not simply to translate more Indonesian literature, but to ensure that translation expands, rather than confines, the imaginative range of what is written. In that regard, the Lontar Foundation has, since its inception attempted to make heard, in Indonesia and abroad, as many different voices as possible.

Financial constraints have made this venture increasingly difficult. Let's hope for a better new year!

Yuli Ismartono (yismartono@lontar.org)

of Indonesian at IKIP, the Teachers Training Institute.

One of my Indonesian teachers at the University of Wisconsin in Madison was Audrey Ungerer who, prior to my departure for Indonesia, gave me a packet of baby clothes to deliver to Patricia "Pinky" Henry who was teaching English at IKIP. I don't know their connection but Pinky had given birth to her first child in early April and Audrey wanted to send her a gift.

On the afternoon of June 2, my first full day in Malang, I took a

becak to Pinky's home at Jalan Ringgit No. 9 but it was not Pinky who opened the door. It was an Indonesian woman who, judging from her appearance, was obviously not domestic help. I introduced myself in Indonesian and told her that I had a *titipan* for Pinky Henry.

"I am Dameria Nainggolan," she said with a smile but then told me that Pinky and family had left Malang the day before to return to the United States.

"Well, so much for that," I thought, ready to turn and go, but then Dameria began to pepper me with questions, very much like a teacher would. Turns out she was, in fact, a teacher-of-Indonesian-in-training and, as she was testing my skills in Indonesia, she was also practice-teaching. Our conversation that day was trite, to be sure but, nonetheless, a most pleasant one which served to reassure me of my ability to converse in Indonesian.

Jumping forward in this story at a faster pace, in the days, weeks, and months ahead Damé, as I soon came to call her, became a constant companion. She introduced me to her friends, among them Bambang Kaswanti Purwo, future renown linguist; and Deddy Oetomo, a future leading human-rights activist.

We traveled together to Pasir Putih, Picket Nol, and other sites, having great fun along the way, but what I liked most about her was her refusal to ignore my mistakes in Indonesian. She was forever correcting me: "No, John, do not address that woman as 'Ibu' but as 'Mbak.'" "No, John, use the 'meng' form not 'ber'." "No, John; no, John; no, John!"

After the advanced Indonesian language study program ended, I traveled to North Sumatra where, with letters of introduction from Damé, I met a number of her relatives and was given the Batak name, Saut Gultom. After my return to Jakarta, I enrolled in the Faculty of Letters at the University of Indonesia campus in Rawamangun. Damé,



Dameria Nainggolan in 1977

100 Years... An idea!



The year 2025 marked the centenary of Pramodya Ananta Toer's birth, prompting a wide-ranging series of commemorations that reaffirmed his place at the heart of Indonesian—and world—literature. Across Indonesia and abroad, universities, cultural centers, and community groups hosted seminars and public discussions revisiting Pramodya's life, ideas, and enduring relevance.

Exhibitions of manuscripts, photographs, and archival materials offered glimpses into his creative process and the years he endured censorship and imprisonment. Readings and theatrical adaptations introduced episodes from the *Buru Quartet* to new audiences, while publishers released commemorative editions and new translations, extending his global reach.

More than a celebration, the centenary became a moment of reflection on freedom of expression and historical memory.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if every year another author was so honored? Might such an annual celebration help to promote literacy? What noted Indonesian authors were born in 1926? A short list would include, Asrul Sani, known for his work as a playwright and screenwriter; Kho Ping Hoo, famous for writing hundreds of popular martial-arts and adventure novels; P. Sengodjo, known as a writer of short stories and poetry; and J.S. Badudu, known as a writer and language expert. How about a centenary celebration in 2026 for one of these authors?



Bambang Kaswanti Purwo, Damé, and JHM at Damé's family home in Bogor.

too, had recently settled in Jakarta and was now an employee at Badan Bahasa, the National Language Center, whose offices were adjacent to the U.I. campus.

We saw each other as much as we could, lunching together on the campus and attending performances at Taman Ismail Marzuki in the evenings. Many a weekend, I spent at her family home in Bogor where I got to know her parents and siblings. When Damé's father died suddenly in December 1976, I knelt beside his coffin, eerily shaken as the water dripping from the ice blocks beneath his corpse pattered on the catchment trays below.

At that time, in that era, I measured friendship much as I still do today. If a person is able to truly accept me as I am, then we might be friends. Perhaps I should have affixed "yb" in the salutations of my letters to Damé but such was my affection for her, I always added "ytc" instead. In her letters to me, she did the same. I thought this to be a sign of true friendship but when I "came out" to her in mid-1977, her reaction was not what I expected. I remember, very clearly, circumambulating the fountain in front of Hotel Indonesia, with the two of us screaming at each other such phrases as "You betrayed me!" and "I was just trying to be honest with you!"

Months passed before we communicated again but on December 2, I received a letter from her in which she opened with the salutation, "John ytc." In that letter, she wrote some things I found disturbing; others that brought me relief. In that salutation and in the content of that letter, I saw an appeal for renewed friendship.

I instantly replied, my letter beginning with the salutation, "Dameria ytc" and ending with the comment, "I was truly happy to receive your letter—a sign that our friendship has not completely withered and can grow and blossom again."

And our friendship did bloom again—for decades to come. I saw Damé not too long ago, at her sister Miriyam's home in Bekasi. And though we don't exchange letters any more, if we did, I would begin with the salutation "ytc."

John McGlynn (john_mcglynn@lontar.org)



Surat dari Pejompongan

BARU

Kawan Moer,

Dalam sastra Indonesia, salah satu pokok soal yang penting adalah tegangan antar-generasi. Jika satu generasi menyatakan bahwa mereka adalah ahli waris budaya planet anu, maka generasi berikutnya bisa jadi akan mendaku mereka berpijak pada planet mereka sendiri. Apa yang sudah dilakukan generasi sebelumnya, bisa jadi ditampik habis-habisan oleh generasi berikutnya. Atau, dipakai kembali dengan sejumlah modifikasi sehingga pemakaian kembali itu terlihat sebagai sebuah kebaruan.

Setelah Chairil Anwar meninggal dunia pada 1949, tidak lama setelah itu Asrul Sani mengumumkan sebuah esai yang berjudul “Surat Kepercayaan Gelanggang”. Itulah satu-satunya maklumat yang dipercaya sebagai pernyataan politik Angkatan 45. Tapi, pernyataan itu tidak berdiri sendiri. Setelah itu muncullah apa yang disebut sebagai “Mukadimah Lekra”. Pendirian Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (Lekra) bisa juga disebut sebagi reaksi atas kegagalan Angkatan 45.

Meskipun orang-orang Lekra bereaksi keras atas pendakuan Angkatan 45 sebagai “ahli waris yang sah budaya dunia”, pada dasarnya mereka bergerak dari generasi itu juga. Orang-orang yang kemudian memperkuat Lekra adalah mereka yang dulu bergiat dalam lingkaran Chairil Anwar atau tumbuh sebagai gejala serentak Angkatan ini: Sebutlah Rivai Apin, Affandi, Sudjojono, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Utuy Tatang Sontani,

Tentu saja, penampikan ini dipicu oleh ketidakpuasan atas Angkatan 45—jika bukan kecemburuan. Palsanya, pada generasi ini sudah jelas bagaimana sastra Indonesia mencoba menjangkau internasionalisasi dengan segala cara. Sementara pada seniman-seniman Lekra, mereka kembali kepada rakyat sebagai agen utama penciptaan kebudayaan. Lantas, apakah mereka tidak mengacu kepada seni dari luar sana? Tentu saja, mereka menjadikan, misalnya, penulis Rusia semacam Maxim Gorky sebagai model.

Dengan kata lain, Lekra tidak menolak orientasi internasional, tetapi menekankan betapa pentingnya seni yang berpihak kepada rakyat. Lantas, apakah Chairil Anwar dan kawan-kawan tidak berpihak kepada rakyat? Tentu saja berpihak. Puisi-puisi Chairil sarat dengan pemihakan kepada orang-orang yang terbuang di Jakarta. Simaklah sajaknya “Aku Berkisar Antara Mereka”. Hanya saja, Chairil tidak menggunakan ideologi Marxisme sebagai landasan. Rivai Apin, lain lagi. Sejak awal, selain Pramoedya dan Utuy dalam prosa, dialah yang memulai sajak-sajak berwatak proletariat dalam Angkatan 45. Dia bisa disebut sebagai “bapak” dari penyair-penyair Kiri yang kemudian berhimpun di Lekra.

THANK YOU



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Please accept our sincerest apologies if, inadvertently, we missed anyone's name!

Namun, reaksi lain terhadap Angkatan 45 yang juga penting dicatat adalah pada sikap para penyair yang tumbuh pada 1950-an. Meski tanpa juru bicara yang terang-terangan—kecuali Nugroho Notosusanto pernah menulis dalam sebuah esainya—para penyair dari generasi ini adalah mereka yang mengambil jalan “kembali ke kampung halaman”. Seakan-akan ada puisi yang berpijak pada bumi sendiri—sebagaimana disinyalir Goenawan Mohamad—ketika para penyair sebelumnya mencoba menjangkau internasionalisme kesusastraan.

Sebetulnya sikap memuliakan bumi sendiri bukan tanpa sebab sama sekali. Berbeda dari generasi Chairil yang tumbuh dalam budaya pendidikan Belanda, para penyair generasi 1950-an adalah mereka yang mengalami pendidikan setelah Perang Dunia Kedua berakhir, ketika Indonesia baru saja merdeka dan menata kembali dunia pendidikan yang berwatak nasionalistis. Penguasaan akan sejumlah bahasa asing pada Angkatan 45 sangat menentukan pencapaian mereka pada bentang sastra dunia. Sementara para penulis generasi 1950-an lebih banyak menyerap sastra dunia yang beredar melalui terjemahan. Mereka sangat menggantungkan diri pada majalah-majalah sastra dan seni yang terbit setelah Indonesia merdeka: *Mimbar Indonesia*, *Siasat*, *Indonesia*, *Zenith*, *Kisah* . . .

Jadi, jika mereka mendaku kembali kepada bumi sendiri, bukan tidak mungkin karena mereka tidak mampu menjangkau dunia sana secara langsung. Jadi, faktor pendidikan juga sangat menentukan bagaimana orientasi kesusastraan sebuah generasi. Tapi, bukan berarti, pada generasi ini tidak ada seniman yang berorientasi intelektual. Ada, tetapi tidak banyak jumlahnya. Di antara yang sedikit itu, ada Subagio Sastrowardoyo, Nugroho Notosusanto, Rendra.

Jadi, tegangan antar-generasi itu adalah masalah klasik yang akan terus berulang dalam sastra Indonesia. Tapi, justru di situlah asyiknya. Reaksi baru akan menimbulkan daya cipta baru. Mudah-mudahan, benar-benar baru.

Begitu dulu ya, Bung. Salam. **Zen Hae** (zenhae@lontar.org)

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