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Writing With and Against National Identity

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Panel: Writing With (and Against) National Identity

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In the past year, I’ve noticed that I have been getting more invitations to speak in panels that almost invariably have to do with identity, and always specifically as an Indonesian who writes in English (which is supposed to be something of a curiosity).

Loneliness is perhaps the word that sums it up best. The two languages, Indonesian and English, except through a brief period of British occupation in the 19th century, have very little, if any, shared history. This makes the Indonesian experience very different than, say, that of the Indian.

Furthermore, because the English language demands an English-speaking audience, it turns me into a kind of “double Other,” if you will: in my own country I am different because I occasionally write in English, to an English-speaking audience, I am different because I am an Indonesian. To a degree, Indonesians expect me to write about things Indonesian—to represent “Us.” English-speaking audiences expect me also to write about things Indonesian—to affirm “Them.” (All this rambling, you realize, is just an excuse for saying that nobody ever reads my books.)

What is clear, however, is that each side would find me a deficit, for in my “Indonesian-ness” I am hardly of “one root.” I was born and bred in Jakarta. It is the same city that has always been “home” to both my parents, as well as their parents before them, who are from West Sumatra and Central Java respectively. Both my parents lived and studied in Europe for nearly a quarter of their lives; they speak a combination of Indonesian and Dutch to each other while my mother occasionally speaks Javanese to our domestic help. I myself grew up with two languages: Indonesian and English.

Yet culture is always a hybrid. It is a self-perpetuating frontier that always results in and embodies difference. Culture always looks outwards, as opposed to boundaries, national or otherwise, which always keep the Other out and sew themselves shut. If history, in all this, does not speak the way we wish, such as in defining a person’s origin, neither does geography. Geographically, “origin” is something contingent, conditioned by a choice of boundaries, while culture is always what happens in practice.

Thus, since we are by definition subjects in process, identity is always a deficit, for it produces and experiences a deficit all the time. While the process itself can be an endless “trial” by the big Other, there is always something in the subject that struggles to preserve the “I”, that ungraspable, private “I.”

In Indonesian literary history, such an “I” was embodied by Asrul Sani, one of the leading writers of the post-war generation. This is what he wrote in 1951: “I no longer want to talk about East and West, because we can only see all these familiar images by being fixed in time. Ultimately one must sign the missive of one’s own time. A choice of locale within time marching onwards.” For that, he was often panned by his critics for being rootless, for not having his heart in his homeland, for wanting something which had no connection with Indonesian-ness.

To others, however, Asrul Sani was simply someone who was always standing on the border between two places. “I do not run from the East and I am not charging wildly towards the setting Sun.” he wrote. What he wanted was to go towards life, no matter where that life might be happening. His
affirmation of freedom, like the poet Chairil Anwar’s, was to escape everything, to go to sea: a space of journey, adventure, challenge, a space that knows no boundary.

Yet such was the chauvinism of the colonial gaze carried through to the postcolonial. One couldn’t help but remember Frantz Fanon and a story he once told of the instant in which a little white girl he encountered on the street in Paris shouted at him, “Look, a Negro!” and all he could remember thinking was how the little girl had taken over his language and he was rendered completely speechless.

Now, more than half a century later, Fanon’s colonial experience is light-years away from a world in which newer, younger writers keep popping up, redefining the postcolonial experience through their own narrative voices in a way that draws attention to the specific, subjective contexts in which meaning is produced. But some of its features seem to prevail. In the wish for self-assertion, we often feel we must go back to our own indigenous values in order to rebuild, in Memmi’s words, our “Authentic nature...reform their unity, communicate with it and feel that (we) belong.”

Yet, I argue that the process of self-recovery is often problematic. For in the midst of revolt we accept our difference and separation from the big Other and so continue to, as Memmi says, “think, feel and live against and, therefore, in relation to...” the big Other. And, as Majid Yar once opined, “To render the other known, understood, interpretable, is to rob her of her alterity or difference, to appropriate and assimilate her into a sameness with my own subjectivity.”

It follows thus that no one subject, despite its identification, is ever of one root, of one home, or even of one language. We know words are always intertwined with memory, and the storeroom of our memory creates that ravine—our own private world. When one writes, one inevitably lives in the private world of that language—and therein lies the impetus to “discover” language, since the language of communication—“everybody’s language”—is by definition never adequate.

When I wrote the stories that were later published in a collection called The Diary of R.S., I went through an extraordinary cross-cultural experience. Most of the stories in that collection are my very personal responses to paintings that “speak” to me and have taken on their own stories inside me. Strangely, those paintings are all European: Dali, Grosz, Beckmann, Toulouse-Lautrec, Munch, de Chirico.

Yet, through them I saw Indonesia—or rather, scenes of Indonesia. Take the painting by Toulouse-Lautrec, for instance, which, through my musings, became the story The Prostitute and the Dwarf.

In the painting, there is a woman in front of her mirror, wearing a sort of a death robe. I was not lured into the specific setting in which the painter found her, whoever she was (the title of the painting had her down as Mme. Poupoule). Instead, I asked myself the question: “What does a woman have to go through to end up looking like that?” What followed was the image of a woman, once young, from rural Java, who went to Jakarta to become a domestic help but ended up as a prostitute, and how she struck this deep, empathetic relationship with a dwarf, who is of course, a direct take on the painter’s own condition. As you know, Toulouse Lautrec is famously a dwarf, and an albino, with a penchant for drawing the down-and-out. And I thought, well, the canvas may be set in a very specific Paris, but it can equally speak about two marginalized people in the Jakarta of today. It is as universal as it is unique.

Of course, what Toulouse-Lautrec really saw in Mme. Poupoule is anybody’s guess. Yet there is something in the way that he uses unstable colors that are not counter-balanced by another object or
construction the way his more celebrated images tend to be that suggests to me the intimacy of someone who is involved with the subject of the painting. Again, it is not my job to find the truth; what it evokes is all the grist I need.

At this point it’s worth pointing out the porousness—indeed, the impossibility!—of the idea of “national identity.” Ever since nationalism became a key new element in the struggle against colonialism in the 20th century, history has been conscripted by states in order to define a national identity that suits modern demands.

Yet the cultural history of the Indonesian archipelago is in itself a concatenation of cultures as “unbounded” systems of meaning and signification. They are never pure or “original” and always in the process of renewal and change. The continuous interpenetration of one culture by another has long predated colonialism and, owing to the location of the archipelago at the center of maritime trading routes between India and China, it means that from ancient times, Indonesian cultures have always been subject to external influences that produced syncretic belief systems, social structures and aesthetic forms.

The past, therefore, is neither “one” nor an abyss; rather, it is a closure conceived by an inventive memory. “Rediscovering” tradition is at best tricky, for it establishes a false presence of origin further distorted by its placement on center stage. The “nation’s” desire for coherence implies, thus, a process of exclusion. And this begins, as Ernest Renan contends, with forgetting.

As to the idea of “Indonesia,” Benedict Anderson tells us in *Imagined Communities* that the concept is a 20th century invention, imposed upon a nation that now consists of 17,000 islands, some 450 languages—a space that is constantly in flux and never the “one” thing. In a fundamental way, it was also borne out of the politics of language.

Indeed, at the end of the 19th century, when the particular variant of Malay known as “Melayu” crystallized as the dominant medium of everyday communication and literary writing in Batavia, its future development was marked by the properties of “looseness” and “heterogeneity” that had made it serviceable as a language of communication between social classes and across cultures in the archipelago for centuries. This was especially so in the 1930s, when the name “Malay” was changed to “Indonesian” by a group of Indonesian nationalists as a reaction against the Dutch colonial politics of segregation according to race. In fact, this Janus-faced project—the rejection of colonization (or “forgetting”) on the one hand, and an intense imagining of a self on the other—was, and still is, necessarily reliant on its “homelessness,” or a lack of cultural authority and location intrinsic to itself.

Yet out of all this, something binds the condition of the Indonesian language and the Indonesian person writing in English. And that, I believe, is poetry.

It was around three years ago that I stumbled into poetry. I was in the flush of an attempt at a novel about contemporary life in Indonesia, one that would deal with historical memory as well as the many faces of Islam. As they say, memory is the duty of the narrative. But it became progressively more difficult as I realized how paralyzed I had gradually become, ever since I moved to Singapore, and “not living in the vernacular.” I realized how distant I have become from the *details* of life in Indonesia: the textures of certain fabrics, the smell of certain rainy nights, the sibilant noise of the street’s morning brooms slapping on gravel. Removed from them, I could not bring them back to life.
So the novel quickly degenerated into some rambling stream of consciousness that threatened to become everything it tried not to be. I started trying too hard to assert my Indonesian-ness and to imagine those experiences—rather too creatively, I might add—only to buckle under this feeling of being fake. It was only after I abandoned the novel for about six months that I began to revisit certain phrases I liked, paragraphs that seemed too valuable not to utilize, and set them to verse.

Suddenly, some of them started to take on a life of its own, and the pandering to stereotypes was gone. As Bakhtin says, any sense of “boundedness, the historicity, the social determination of one’s language is ‘alien’ to poetic style. Whereas the novelist tries to represent, even to exaggerate, the condition of heteroglossia, the poet escapes it in order to write in a language that is timeless.”

And indeed in poetry I feel I have finally found a space where I do not feel that what I write is definable. It feels as though I have found a private sanctuary from which to flee the gaze of the Other, where language can just freely be, accountable to nothing and no one. It tells me to rummage through everything in my storeroom of memory that comes to mind: a half-forgotten phrase, the edges and elbows of a song, a mythological creature, a sound that reverberates through a landscape.

Take “Ellipsis,” the title poem of my first poetry collection. I was musing on the meaning of the word—omission of the implied word—and started thinking of how it could be a metaphor for a flight: the flight of a word from a sentence that may bind it to a meaning that is excessively fixed, perhaps, or even an escape from the imperialization of a singular possibility—a thinking, willing flight, that is—an active, modern act. Then the imageries of a witch hunt started to pour in—this poem was composed around the time of Arthur Miller’s death—in which you have a female person being hunted down from her flight to the moon—the moon being, traditionally, male, and one so blasé and experienced as to have been already “singed by birds on heat”—and tied up to a stake in an open piazza all day in order to extract a confession out of her.

The phrase “flayed, but hiding nothing” is meant to allude both to a skinning, a stripping down of all layers, as well as a flogging, a lashing—which the verb “to be flayed” can also mean—which is very suggestive of a violent interpretive act, the act of forcing a meaning onto something that may have its own free will. But the seemingly modern act of escaping, like a poem in its becoming, can also be free of purpose—a playful, innocent, curious stemming out into different paths.

Has nothing changed?
Oil lamps and torch lights catching
ellipsis in mid-flight,
preventing her from reaching the
moon, already singed by birds on heat.

Baked now, in the sun.
Flayed to pith
but hiding nothing.
Certainty makes fools of us.

She doesn’t know her crime,
only that she enjoys the increments
of the four seasons,
and the folds of unswept beaches -
No one telling you whether to sink or swim.
And now the first waves of shadow
roll across the square. The fire-folks are gone
and the moon is the white of Pierrot.
In the morning there will be a sentence;
a full sentence at last -
as if things were any different spelt out
from what is more or less known.

In closing, I remember a poet friend of mine who likens poetry to echo: it is but a witness that we do
not live in a vacuum or in an empty space, that we do not only consist of one side, and that there is
something there that multiplies our voices into other places. When we hear that echo, we know there is
a “meaning” or a value far greater than “nationalism” or “identity” and that is the plurality within us.