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ýSitti Nurbaja'; Some reconsiderations. With comments by Taufik Abdullah

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“SITTI NURBAJA”: SOME RECONSIDERATIONS

I

Marah Rusli's novel *Sitti Nurbaja* was published first by Balai Pustaka in 1922.¹ It was by far the most popular of Indonesian novels prior to the second world war and still retained a great deal of popularity after it. This is common knowledge. That it is also a novel which has, as yet, not had its fair critical due, is rather less obvious. Most critics refer to it, after all, at one stage or another in their studies, even if, upon closer examination, rather briefly. (Drs H. B. Jassin refers to the novel nine times in his four volumes of *Kritik dan Esei*; none of the references are longer than one sentence.) Further, there seems to be a remarkably high degree of consensus as to the position, the themes, and the significance of the book within the structure of modern Indonesian literature.²

Conventionally it seems the following comments are considered necessary from the critic of *Sitti Nurbaja*.

Firstly, a passing reference to the primacy, or the pioneering position, of the novel in the historical development of Indonesian literature. To choose three examples: Takdir Alisjahbana's reference to "Marah

¹ Marah Rusli was born in Padang, central Sumatra, 1889: son of Sutan Abu Bakar gelar Sutan Pangeran and a commoner, hence his title. Educated Sekolah Radja, Bukit Tinggi; Faculty of Veterinary Science, Bogor, graduated 1915. Broke with his family same year after marrying without their permission. Practised veterinary science for a few years in Sumbawa, then until the Revolution in Semarang. During the Revolution lived at Solo, working part-time with the navy; then, 1948, lecturer in veterinary science at Klaten. Returned to Semarang in 1950; retiring to live in Bogor in 1951, working part-time at the Bogor Livestock Inspection Station. Died in Bandung, 17th January 1968. Besides *Sitti Nurbaja*, Rusli wrote *La Hami* (1953) and *Anak dan Kemanakan* (1956). W. Roff (*The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, 1967, pp. 153-4) seems to attribute *Melati van Agam* to him as well.

² The introductory paragraphs of A. H. Johns: "A Poet Between Two Worlds: The Work of Sitor Situmorang", *Westerly* October 1966, contain a strong attack on the stock nature of much of Indonesian literary criticism.

Rusli's *Sitti Nurbaja*, the first significant modern Indonesian novel laid within the context of modern culture",³ Prof. A. H. Johns' evaluation of *Sitti Nurbaja* as "the first Indonesian work which can properly be described as a novel",⁴ and Idrus' simple description of the book as "the first great novel of modern Indonesian literature".⁵

Statements such as these are unexceptional as matters of literary judgement and, as long as they are not taken as the simple facts of literary history, do no harm (on the contrary). By their careful expression, they imply that, although there were other novels published before *Sitti Nurbaja* — the novels of Semaun and of Mas Marco Kartodikromo for instance,⁶ as well as Merari Siregar's *Azab dan Sengsara* published in 1920 — these earlier novels lack some critically admirable quality, some distinguishing trait, which is to be found in *Sitti Nurbaja* for the first time. Unfairly, perhaps, they ignore the fact that *Azab dan Sengsara* at least, has many of the features of plot for which *Sitti Nurbaja* is famed: a sentimental love interest thwarted by the introduction of a third partner of immoral character, conflict between the young people and their parents, resentment at out-of-date *adat* practices, heavy didacticism and the climaxing of the plot in the death of the heroine who was the central, and title, figure of the book. In points of technique there are many features in common between the books: the irrelevance of the beginning to the rest of the book, flat characterisation, traditional narrative devices prose and verse, the introduction of large amounts of apparently irrelevant illustrative material. Sometimes, however, the primacy of *Sitti Nurbaja* as "the pioneering work of modern Indonesian literature",⁷ or "usually accepted as the first Indonesian novel",⁸ is to be found. Such statements are of course, both misleading and inaccurate.

The second type of comment is usually the most prolonged. This is a discussion of the sociological significance of *Sitti Nurbaja*, usually in terms of such critical conventional wisdom as "*adat* conflict", "east-west conflict", and "generation conflict". As Professor A. Teeuw's con-

³ *Indonesia in the Modern World*, New Delhi, 1961, p. 60.

⁴ "Genesis of a Modern Literature", in (ed.) R. McVey *Indonesia*, New Haven, 1963, p. 415.

⁵ "East-West Conflict in Indonesian Novels", *Quadrant*, Nov.-Dec. 1966, p. 39.

⁶ See A. Teeuw: *Modern Indonesian Literature*, The Hague, 1967, pp. 15-17.

⁷ Heather Sutherland: "Pudjangga Baru: Aspects of Indonesian Intellectual Life in the 1930's", *Indonesia* (Cornell), October 1968, p. 107.

⁸ A. H. Johns: "The Novel as a Guide to Indonesian Social History", BKI 1959, p. 233. (Hereafter, Johns: "The Novel as a Guide...")

venient summary has it, "the theme typical to prewar Indonesian literature: the marriage partner forced on the young people by tradition, the conflict between the generations, the struggle between *adat* (tradition) and the personal wishes and desires of the young individuals".⁹ As most literary critics are not by training also sociologists, this can scarcely be an example of Northrop Frye's delightful definition of determinism, "where a scholar with a special interest in geography or economics (or sociology) expresses that interest by the rhetorical device of putting his favorite study into a causal relationship with whatever interests him less (in this case literature)".¹⁰

Taking up our former quotations again, Takdir goes on to say that: "Marah Rusli shows us the pure love between two young people contrasted with the devious complexities of a whole traditional society, for which marriage was not merely an expression of familial responsibility, but was often a matter for unscrupulous financial calculation. In the struggle that ensued between the old and the new, both are destroyed."¹¹ Johns argues that *Sitti Nurbaja* and the other novels of the period, to which it is similar in theme and treatment, deals with the predicaments of young people caught between the old world and the new. At home they are expected to live according to the traditional pattern of life, any disobedience being heavily punished; at school, and through contact with Europeans, they learn of economic independence, personal responsibility, and possible independence from the claims of their extended family and clan. "The conflict between the two ways of life is brought most sharply into focus when the question of marriage arises: is the choice of a spouse to be a personal or parental responsibility?"¹² A much longer study of the Indonesian novel by Johns, in which *Sitti Nurbaja* features prominently, is significantly entitled "The Novel as a Guide to Indonesian Social History".¹³ Idrus, "determined to find the East-West conflict in the novel", decides that it is the central theme in the book, "even to such an extent that you become doubtful about the importance of the other themes it might have".¹⁴ And Amal Hamzah asserts that *Sitti Nurbaja* is essentially "a very dull book" which we keep reading "only because we are

⁹ Teeuw: *op. cit.*, p. 54.

¹⁰ *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1957, p. 6.

¹¹ Takdir Alisjahbana: *loc. cit.*

¹² Johns: *loc. cit.*

¹³ Johns: *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Idrus: *loc. cit.*

interested in the (sociological) problems the author discusses".¹⁵ Later in this article, I intend to argue that the conventional wisdom is, in fact, not relevant to the central concerns of the novel, and has led to an entirely inaccurate conception of the novel and its structure.

But, finally, it seems that *Sitti Nurbaja* requires occasional comment as to its anti-nationalist intent, revealed particularly in its hero's joining of the Dutch army and his subjection of the rebel Indonesian forces under the leadership of the villain of the novel. Writing during the Indonesian Revolution, Amal Hamzah, in reversing the customary evaluations, described the former as "a sentimental figure", "excessively romantic", in love with love, and "a tool used to extinguish the rebellion of his own people", and the villain as "a pioneer of independence who arouses our sympathy", although not all his aspects are ideal and at first indeed, he makes us hate him.¹⁶ Drs. Umar Junus rejects the writings of all of the 'generation of the twenties' as Indonesian (in opposition to Malay) literature, because they are "quite in opposition to those nationalist characteristics which adhere to the name of Indonesia".¹⁷ Both Ajip Rosidi and Fachruddin Ambo Enre refer to *Sitti Nurbaja* only in connection with this latter statement.¹⁸

This last type of comment is anachronistic in its assessment of the novel's action, set at the turn of the century, in terms of norms applicable to the 1945 struggle: irrelevant, in that the hero's motives are not anti-nationalist but suicidal: forgetful of the conditions under which the novel was published and the manner in which anti-Dutch sentiments are skilfully placed in the novel (in chapter XV), as well as of the shame and anguish the hero bears as a soldier who is a self-confessed murderer of his own people¹⁹ and an undenied *andjing Belanda*.²⁰

¹⁵ *Buku dan Penulis*, Djakarta, 1955, p. 16.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁷ "Istilah dan masa waktu 'Sastra Melaju' dan 'Sastra Indonesia'", *Medan Ilmu Pengetahuan*, Vol. 1, No. 3, July 1960, p. 255.

¹⁸ Rosidi: *Kapankah Kesusastraan Indonesia Lahir* (Djakarta, 1964). Fachruddin Ambo Enre: *Perkembangan Puisi Indonesia dalam masa dua puluhan* (Djakarta, 1963). Also A. Teeuw: *op. cit.*, p. 56, and Bakri Siregar: *Sedjarah Sastra Indonesia Modern*, Djakarta, 1964, pp. 51-54.

¹⁹ Eleventh printing, Kuala Lumpur, 1963, p. 384, chapter XIV.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 419, chapter XVI. Granted that Samsulbahri has no chance to deny the charge (he dies soon after), Rusli, who is usually very careful in shaping our attitudes to his characters, does nothing to justify Samsulbahri's behaviour, or to rebut the 'insult'.

II

A brief summary of the plot of *Sitti Nurbaja* may be of benefit to some readers at this point.

The story concerns two young people, Sitti Nurbaja and Samsulbahri who have grown up together, almost as brother and sister,²¹ fallen in love, and vowed to marry when Samsulbahri returns to Sumatra from his studies in medicine in Djakarta. While he is away, however, Sitti Nurbaja is forced to marry the evil money-lender Datuk Meringgih who has financially ruined her father. She does this rather than have him, her father, imprisoned for debt. After his first year's study in Djakarta, Samsulbahri returns to Sumatra, where he meets Nurbaja again. As they talk of old times, their conversation is interrupted by Datuk Meringgih and a fight develops. Hearing Nurbaja's screams, her father, now a sick and broken man, stumbles from his sick-bed to to help his daughter, killing himself in his effort to do so. Samsulbahri's father, who has formerly been presented as an intelligent and devoted personality, disowns his son and drives him out of his house.

Her father dead, and herself thus no longer under obligation to Datuk Meringgih, Nurbaja disassociates herself from Meringgih and flees to Djakarta, to Samsulbahri who has returned to college. Datu Meringgih has her brought back, under false pretences. Samsulbahri's premonition that he will never see Nurbaja again is fulfilled when she is poisoned on Meringgih's orders. Samsu attempts various methods of suicide, all of which are unsuccessful, and he joins the army to find death. Instead he becomes a hero. Eventually Samsulbahri is sent to Padang to suppress a local uprising, led as it turns out by Datuk Meringgih himself, largely in defence of his own wealth. In the battle, Samsulbahri reveals himself to Meringgih, kills him, and dies himself, having reconciled himself to his father although the latter has not at first recognised him.

Clearly the plot has obvious parallels to the concept of European theatrical melodrama, as found in Frank Rahill's description of the elements of melodrama: "a simple conflict of right and wrong, an abundance of exciting physical action, low comedy relief, elaborate scenic displays and even musical accompaniment".²² In the following

²¹ Note the description on page 10, chapter I: *serasa orang jang seibu sebab keduanya*. See also, my "The Thorny Rose: The Avoidance of Passion in Modern Indonesian Literature", *Indonesia* (Cornell), April 1969.

²² "Melodrama", *Theatre Arts Monthly*, April 1939, p. 294.

discussion of these parallels, I wish it to be understood that I am using the word 'melodrama' in a non-evaluative way, to refer to any imaginative creation containing those elements. To the objection that I am using a term specifically meant for the theatre in discussion of a different literary genre, I must point out that 'tragic' and 'comic' have both been used in this way, and, more importantly, that there is no other word which will suitably describe the patterns of symbolic action common to the nineteenth century novel and drama, and Indonesian practices.²³

The characters are in *Sitti Nurbaja* "essentially whole" and devoid of inner conflict, as R. B. Heilman phrases it in his comparative study of melodrama and tragedy.²⁴ Nurbaja is essentially sweet, virtuous, obedient and passive: Samsulbahri is hard, firm, a man of swift action, yet at the same time possessor of a fine sensibility. (The contrast is established right at the beginning of the book, in waiting for coachman Ali.) They are, quite simply, good people; our reaction to them is a single overwhelming response of sympathy. Datuk Meringgih is, on the other hand, an unmitigated villain in all his behaviour, and is even provided with a kind of gothic, rich with spiders and filth, mansion. Our dislike of him is similarly strong. He too has only one dimension of motivation, and no possibility of faltering in its performance. As virtue is personified in the heroine Nurbaja, we find the threat to it presented in the conventional, physical, specifically sexual, terms. Meringgih desires to have Nurbaja, the cost of ruining her father is an incidental expense. As David Grimsted says, the job of the villain is, after all, one of "shattering virtue's temple".²⁵

And just as *Sitti Nurbaja* has parallels to European melodrama in its "conception of character and alignment of forces",²⁶ so its themes, too, are readily recognisable from this perspective: innocence belea-

²³ Peacock in his *Rites of Modernization: Symbolic and Social Aspects of Indonesian Proletarian Drama*, Chicago and London, 1968, uses the word *passim* in his discussion of *ludruk* in Surabaya.

²⁴ "Tragedy and Melodrama: Speculations on Generic Form", *Texas Quarterly*, Summer 1960, p. 46.

²⁵ *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theatre and Culture, 1800-1850* (Chicago, 1968), p. 175. (Grimsted is possibly punning on the title of the best-selling sentimental novel *Charlotte Temple*, which went through over two hundred editions in America in the nineteenth century. On this novel see Leslie A. Fiedler: *Love and Death in the American Novel*, New York, 1960, pp. 68-73.)

²⁶ "The identifying mark of melodramatic structure is not the particular outcome of the plot, but the conception of character and the alignment of the forces." R. B. Heilman: *op. cit.*, p. 47.

guered, the father's foolish pact with the untrustworthy villain, the frustration of true love by inescapable marriage, the false accusation and rejection of the hero by his father, the escape, pursuit and final recapture of the heroine by the villain, poignant death of the child-like heroine, the hero's madness on hearing this and his transformation into a military adventurer in search of death, the revenging of the heroine in hand-to-hand combat between the villain and the hero, the repentance of the hero's father of his rashness towards his son too late, the final reconciliation of the lovers in eternity.²⁷ It is that same world of shock and thrill,²⁸ heightened by the introduction of the supernatural — the various, never quite impossible omens Samsulbahri has of Nurbaja's successive fates — acted upon and dominated by the errors of others, and the imperfections of the circumstances.²⁹

Seen within the perspectives of melodrama, Nurbaja's marriage to Meringgih takes on a new complexion, or perhaps merely its correct one. The provisions of *adat* have nothing to do with the arrangement of the marriage: her family does not invite him to marry her, they certainly do not stand in any of the preferred cross or parallel positions of cousinship favoured by Minangkabau society,³⁰ nothing is discussed

²⁷ Copies of dramatic scripts of the nineteenth-century theatre melodrama are not as readily available as one would wish: however, for England and America, see R. Moody: *Dramas from the American Theatre 1762-1909*, Cleveland and New York, 1966; R. W. Corrigan: *British Drama: the Nineteenth Century*, New York, 1967; and G. Rowell: *Nineteenth Century Plays*, London, 1965. A useful entry to the melodramatic novel is Leslie Fiedler: *op. cit.*, Part One.

²⁸ R. B. Heilman: *op. cit.*, p. 45. A. R. Thompson in his study of "Melodrama and Tragedy", PMLA, September 1929, pp. 810-35, also emphasises the emotions of "fear and horror", "the thrill of violent action" and the "vicarious satisfaction of egocentric desires for power and success and for altruistic sentimental emotions, pity and love".

²⁹ Heilman considers melodrama as a "literature of disaster", *op. cit.*, pp. 42-45. Compare A. H. Johns: "The Novel as a Guide...", BKJ 1959, "It is fate that warns Samsu in a dream that Datuk Meringgih will destroy him and Nurbaja, fate that tells him in a dream that Nurbaja is dead, and fate that tells him (also in a dream) when he sets out to fight his own people and co-religionists on behalf of the Dutch, that the path traced out for him is nearly complete, and that he will soon rejoin his mother and Nurbaja" (p. 240). And earlier: "There is a kind of moral pattern imposed on the work, which, if pretentiously put, might be called a dialogue between a man (Samsu) and his fate" (p. 235).

³⁰ Robyn Le Bis in a study of six early Indonesian novels, notes that cross-cousin marriage occurs in all of them except *Sitti Nurbaja*. (*Marriage in Minangkabau as seen through the writings of Minangkabau authors*. B. A. Thesis, Dept of Indonesian and Malaysian Languages and Literatures, Australian National University, 1968.)

with members of her mother's clan. Sitti Nurbaja is at no point forced by mere social custom to marry Meringgih. Rather, Meringgih has planned her downfall, through the ruin of her helpless father, and what follows is the lowpoint of numerous melodramas: the heroine, unwillingly but self-sacrificially marrying the villain to avoid the imprisonment of her own father, who is through various disasters which are no fault of himself, unable to meet the debt he has so foolishly contracted.³¹ Once more the familiar dialogue rings out: "Marry me..." — "Never!" — "...or your father goes to prison!" — "You cad!". Once more the audience, and we have seen it was a substantial one, recoils in child-like self-identification with her,³² and yearns for the only true solution of melodrama: the death of the villain.³³

III

My first contention, then, is that the plot of *Sitti Nurbaja*, and its style of characterisation, can be, without offence, termed 'melodramatic'. I understand that the models for this type of story were plentiful in Dutch dime-novels at the beginning of the century,³⁴ and would have been readily available to Rusli, would possibly have been found in the *bangsarwan* drama,³⁵ but were certainly entirely absent from traditional Minangkabau literature.³⁶ My own training in European literature, and the Dutchness of Nurbaja and Samsulbahri (Nurbaja unchaperoned on a picnic with three boys,³⁷ the farewell party for Samsulbahri and his companions at which the young people drink toasts in wine and dance the waltz), as well as the type of person I conceive Rusli to be,³⁸ suggest the first alternative to me. So much work, however, needs to

³¹ In the first four chapters of the novel, Rusli goes to elaborate lengths to place Samsulbahri's father into a debt relationship with Meringgih. In the rest of the book this promising start is wasted and it is Nurbaja's father's debt which leads to the catastrophe.

³² A. R. Thompson: *op. cit.*, p. 814.

³³ Thompson, in including "the pleasure of cruelty" as one of the emotions satisfied through melodrama, cites Ludwig Lewisohn's statement that "The great aim of melodrama is the killing of the villain", *op. cit.*, p. 281.

³⁴ From discussion with Mr A. van Riel B.D.S., a former student of mine.

³⁵ The opinion of Professor C. Skinner, Indonesian Languages, Monash University.

³⁶ The opinion of Professor A. H. Johns, Indonesian and Malaysian Languages and Literatures, Australian National University.

³⁷ The function of the boys in the novel, I see as low comedy in the main (compare Rahill's definition of melodrama above) and as hope-bringers at the end of the novel.

³⁸ I agree with Johns: "The Novel as a Guide...", BKI 1959, p. 234.

be done in all three fields before a definitive answer can be given.

For, despite its 'modernness',³⁹ *Sitti Nurbaja* has, in style and certain other aspects, many traditional elements, some of which approximate the devices of melodrama.

The carefully balanced sentences Rusli uses are often built up of groupings of four words, in a manner, as Bakri Siregar notes, reminiscent of a man telling an oral folktale.⁴⁰ Nurbaja's description, which has been often quoted since, might have been taken straight from a *penglipor lara* tale: "Her cheeks were like hanging mangos... her nose was straight and fine like a jasmine flower, her lips were split like a pomegranate, and between them was set a row of neatly arranged teeth like two lines of ivory. Her chin was like a ship's curved figure-head...".⁴¹ The *pantun* is used as a means for conveying their feelings for each other⁴²: Samsulbahri writes to her in *sjair*, and considerable use is made throughout of traditional proverb and metaphor.

The traditional devices which approximate to melodrama include the use of flat characterisation, the father's deathbed soliloquy, the transfer of letters, the use of omens and dreams. Archetypally, the story is the uncompleted tale of the beautiful young princess stolen from the brave young hero by the evil and terribly ugly villain. In that the story is told in the form of a novel, and that its characters are 'ordinary people', or as ordinary as Rusli was prepared to make them, acting in ordinary situations, the novel might best be described as melodramatic in plot and folkloristic in its mode of recitation. (The problem is not helped any in that melodrama may be a form of folklore on its own merits.) If this is so, it may be possible to use these characteristics as defining characteristics of what one may call 'the early Indonesian novel', that is the Indonesian novel prior to *Belenggu*. Here, too, further research is necessary.

³⁹ See C. Geertz' extremely valuable comments on the 'national art complex', *Religion of Java*, Illinois, 1960, pp. 305-308; and A. H. Johns: "Indonesian Literature and the Social Upheaval", *Australian Outlook*, December 1959, pp. 293-294.

⁴⁰ *Sedjarah Sastera Indonesia Modern*, Djakarta, 1964, p. 37.

⁴¹ Compare, for example *Hikayat Raja Muda*, Singapore, 1960, p. 100, only one of many similar descriptions.

⁴² Although I would not insist on this, the *pantun* seems to provide the element essay: "The Intentional Fallacy", *The Verbal Icon*, Kentucky, 1954.

⁴³ *Kesusasteraan Baru Indonesia*, Djakarta, 1964, pp. 38-40.

IV

Now let us turn to the problem of the place of *adat* in the novel *Sitti Nurbaja*.

We know that Marah Rusli's father wanted him to marry a girl chosen for him, when he graduated from veterinary school in 1915, and that Rusli was greatly upset by this, preferring to marry a girl of his own choice. For this his father severed all ties with him. Drs Zuber Usman suggests that the writing of *Sitti Nurbaja* was an angry response to this.⁴³ Now whether *Sitti Nurbaja* was written to prove that 'forced marriage' was a bad thing, and that Minangkabau *adat* was irrelevant to the young people of Rusli's day, must, it seems to me,⁴⁴ be ultimately validated by examination of the text itself: a declaration of intention, interesting enough in itself, is insufficient justification for our acceptance of this as a complete interpretation of the text. Our examination of the novel must consider who says what about *adat*, what their relation to each other and the main melodrama is, what evaluation of their opinion Rusli gives, explicitly and implicitly, and, finally, an examination of how *adat* is actually operative in the behaviour of the various characters.

Here, I would suggest that the discussions of *adat* which have so intrigued the various critics are to be found in two principal places in the book: in chapter IV (where large sections of chapter two are repeated) and chapter XII (where part of chapter IX is expanded upon). The former is a description of a discussion of the behaviour of Samsulbahri's father, by his brother and sister; the latter is a discussion of Minangkabau marriage customs between Nurbaja and the family of her friend, Alimah. These discussions introduce characters who appear nowhere else in the novel and whose sole purpose is the exposition of a point of view. The conclusions arrived at are irrelevant to the development of the plot of *Sitti Nurbaja*: whether Samsulbahri's father had educated his son or devoted more attention to his sister's child, has no bearing on whether Samsulbahri is, for example, to marry Nurbaja, or on his attitude to Meringgih. (Nurbaja's father, after all, has brought her up and educated her by himself, and is never criticised for so doing.) The relationship of the father to the plot is in fact so remote that when he drops the role of all-wise father in favour of the mis-

⁴⁴ My thinking here is guided by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's

⁴⁵ Here I have benefited from Sheldon Sacks, *Fiction and the Shape of Belief*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967.

understanding of father and son theme, the action slot is filled by Alimah's father with scarcely a break in the pace. It is arguable that loss (except that another place would have to be found for Nurbaja's death).

In the presentation of these discussions, which I shall subsequently refer to as the 'argument on adat', two distinct rhetorical styles are employed by Rusli.⁴⁵

In chapter IX and XII, to take the simpler case first, we are presented with very straight forward moral and practical arguments as to the shortcomings of Minangkabau marriage custom. The arguments are in the form of numbered, logically-developed and coherent speeches, and no adequate arguments in favour of adat are advanced. Apart from a glance at the possible relativity of religious belief, and a plea for the continuing adaption of *adat* to the present, all the discussion is to detriment of Minangkabau custom: it is too expensive to have too many wives, too many children make even more expense, you can not treat co-wives equally well, etc., etc. The discussion is set among Nurbaja and those people we know have treated her decently, Samsulbahri and Alimah's family, and the signals given by Rusli to guide our responses, indicate that these arguments are, through their association with good people, also good and valid. To underline the 'argument', two examples of the abuse of women in marriage are given: the death of Samsulbahri's traditional-minded cousin (poor stupid child) in child-birth,⁴⁶ and the necessity of Alimah to publicly shame her husband to attain her freedom from a man who has just taken a cowife.⁴⁷

In chapters II and IV, the argument proceeds by inversion. In chapter II Puteri Rubiah upbraids Sutan Mahmud Sjah for his behaviour: in chapter IV, she discusses this behaviour with the shiftless Sutan Hamzah. Each time the questions are the same. Why isn't he like other men? Why has he only one wife, and a commoner at that? Why does he bother to bring up his own son instead of leaving all that nonsense to the boy's uncles? Why does he work for a living when the world owes any respectable noble a living, to be gained through marrying

⁴⁶ I presume this is Rukiah, who appears in chapter II. (Notice by the way, the folkloristic playing with names, her mother is Rubiah). However, this may be another example of Rusli's loose control over the plot: the name used here is Rapih, and her age is clearly two or three years in advance of Rukiah's.

⁴⁷ Johns described this (in "The Novel as a Guide...", BKI 1959, p. 238) as a "passionate plea for her rights as a woman": I am not sure that I see it as gloriously as that.

and cock-fighting, which is his for the taking? And his outrageous statement that polygyny bestializes a man! And his son only a *marah* (as Rusli was) because of that woman! Really!!

Rusli, through the signs of disgust he gives, and I presume, through a faith in the moral refinement of his reader, expects one to see at once the totally immoral and utterly untenable nature of Rubiah's argument and her discussion with Sutan Hamzah, who acts as a paradigm figure for the type of behaviour she is arguing for. Hopelessly old-fashioned (the worst crime), even to the extent of believing in spells and the value of consulting *dukun*; the behaviour of Sutan Hamzah publicly reproached by the author and the recognisably virtuous characters; the sad example of a young girl dead in the first burst of motherhood; and, grossest example of all, the example of Datuk Meringgih, not even a noble, who manipulates for his own enrichment and erotic satisfaction the system under discussion — their argument stands utterly condemned.

It is, perhaps, not too extreme, then, to assert that *Sitti Nurbaja* consists of two fairly unrelated levels. The first, which includes the bulk of the novel, consists of the melodrama of *Sitti Nurbaja* told in a manner stylistically close to folk-lore. Underlying this, and scarcely integrated within it, is the argument on *adat*, found principally in chapters II, IV, IX and XII. The criticism of *adat* may well have been the intention of Rusli in writing *Sitti Nurbaja*, and the melodrama a sugar-coating to help the pill go down more easily: Rusli's case would, however, have been considerably stronger had the two really reinforced each other (had *Nurbaja's* marriage, for instance, been a true example of an *adat*-marriage).

V

There are a number of further points to do with *adat* which need consideration.

Firstly, Rusli by no means rejects *adat* entirely. While not making the distinction sometimes found between systems of *adat* — *adat* given by God (*adat jang sebenarnja adat*), *adat* as originally laid down by the founders of the great law-systems, Ninik Ketumanggungan and Parapatih nan Sabatang (*adat istiadat*), local *adat* fixed by the chiefs and scholars of various regions (*adat jang diadatkan*) and every-day custom (*adat jang teradat*)⁴⁸ — some discrimination is made. *Nurbaja*,

in chapter XII, denies the argument of Alimah who says that "*adat*, as given us by our ancestors, can never be made light of, nor changed at random. Further, we can not reject it, we must obey all of it, the bad sections as well as the good ones". Nurbaja's argument is that: "Among the *adat* and customs of former times, there are some which were formerly good, but which are now no longer of any value or use." Her argument is a pragmatic one: "It is like a piece of clothing, when you first buy it, it can and should be worn; but, after a while, it gets old and worn, and is finally in shreds and of no further use. If you feel reluctant to throw it away because of the service it has given you, all right, save it, but only as a keep-sake! But you do have to buy new clothes too, don't you?"⁴⁸

Secondly, as we have seen, most of the discussion to do with *adat* is actually the discussion of customary behaviour in marriage and child-rearing. There are many facets of every day life which receive virtually no mention at all: property rights, inheritance,⁵⁰ group economic behaviour, various matters to do with the matrilineal extended family.

Thirdly, the book is not concerned with the different strata of Minangkabau society, and their possibly different *adat* systems. The novel is resolutely only about the uppermost class in society, and despite all Rusli's criticisms one suspects that he favoured the retention of a purified aristocracy,⁵¹ and those merchants who are acceptable to them, as Nurbaja's father is, and Datuk Meringgih most certainly is not. Mr Mokhzani bin Abdul Rahim has expressed the opinion that "Marah Rusli's severe treatment of Datuk Meringgih as a villain who has achieved wealth, and, as such social recognition" is "an expression of fear of the orang bangsawan as a class of the challenge to their exclusiveness as a people with prestige, that is being felt simultaneously with the rise of the people with wealth".⁵² Certainly the only commoners

⁴⁸ Ahmad Dt Batuah and A. Dt Madjoindo, *Tambo Minangkabau*, Djakarta, 1956, pp. 110-111.

⁴⁹ *Sitti Nurbaja*, p. 301, chapter XII.

⁵⁰ Notice that it is the inheritance of property from her father which allows Nurbaja to reject Meringgih.

⁵¹ The preface to *La Hami* shows his preference for aristocratic company: the whole of *Anak dan Kemanakan* is based on the hero's ascertainment of the fact that he really is of noble origin; however much talk there may be of 'nobility of the soul', this latter is not quite the same.

⁵² *Minangkabau Writers' View of their Society*. (Honours Sub-thesis, Dept of Malay Studies, University of Malaya, 1960), pp. 86-87.

are the aged family servant, Pak Ali the coachman, a senile, servile old man, the 'folk' worship and picnicing in the grave-yard behind Padang on the day before Ramadhan begins, and the evil followers of Meringgih's perverse school provided for criminals (the melodramatic smuggler's band).⁵³

Finally, to examine the codes of behaviour actually followed by the characters in the book, it is necessary to set up two models of Minangkabau society. For the sake of convenience, these are drawn from J. V. Maretin's article, 'The Disappearance of Matriclan Survivals in Minangkabau Family and Marriage Relations',⁵⁴ which correlates satisfactorily with other material on the Minangkabau available to us.

The first model is of Minangkabau custom "prior to the beginning of the present century".⁵⁵ This is characterised by very strong survivals of matriclan organization: "to wit, matrilineal extended families counting as many as a hundred or more persons and tracing their descent to one real ancestress, inheritance of name and property through the mother's line, dominance of the eldest brother of the eldest woman of the matrilineal extended family in all decisions regarding family matters, high social status of women; marriage not affecting the bond with the matrilineal family of either of the partners, settlement according to the clan-characteristic, clan-exogamy and the like."⁵⁶

Maretin considers that to view this as an accurate description of Minangkabau custom in the early part of this century, as many anthropologists (and literary critics!) have, would be naive. His article illustrates the transformation of this first model into the opposite model, which is characterised by small patrilineal families, private property, the emergence of a managing group of chiefs, the disappearance of traditional rules of exogamy, nuclear family dwellings, the emergence of the father's children as his heirs and the diminution of the share of the sister's children in the inheritance of their uncle.⁵⁷ (As yet, Maretin suggests, such a complete transformation has not finally been achieved.)

Now, although *Sitti Nurbaja* was published in 1922, its story is set

⁵³ Relevant to a study of class-relations in modern Indonesian literature is Utuy Tatang Sontani's: "Sastra Sunda sebagai djurubitjara dua kebudayaan", *Zaman Baru*, November 1964.

⁵⁴ BKI 1961, pp. 168-195.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 168.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 168-169.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 195.

between 1896 and 1907.⁵⁸ One might have expected some archaization of Minangkabau *adat* to suggest a greater contrast between traditional *adat* and the newer, more western, ways of behaviour exemplified by the younger people. Neither all the young people are modernist-minded (Samsu's cousin for instance), nor all the older generation traditionalists (Samsu's father, Nurbaja's father and Alimah's, for instance). But, and more importantly, it appears that all those families who are central to the melodrama model their behaviour on the second, father-right, model, as does Alimah's. And even those who might be recognised as traditionally oriented, the family of Rubiah and Sutan Hamzah, are never upbraided for fulfilling, or criticised for neglecting, the prescriptions of the first model. Meringgih, of course, has no kin-group or traditional obligations. The transition between the models is in *Sitti Nurbaja* complete in the case of the modernists and apparently well on the way for the 'traditionalists'.

HARRY G. AVELING

Mr. Taufik Abdullah has been kind enough to give the following comment:

About two years ago in a brief private discussion with an Indonesian literary critic, I remarked that Indonesian literary criticism was weak in its historical perspective and in its sociological understanding. In answer to my remark, he pointed out that the main function of a critic was to examine literature as a work of art, not as a social documentary. Literature should not be judged by other criteria than its own. He might be right. Not being a literary critic myself, I would not venture to write this brief comment, had Mr. Aveling not undertaken to analyze problems of *adat* in *Sitti Nurbaja* and to apply anthropological models in examining the characters' "code of behaviour".

My first criticism on Mr. Aveling's interesting article is that he, like other critics of Indonesian prewar literature, fails to recognize the nuances and differences in the social settings of the novels written by Minangkabau authors. Marah Rusli's *Sitti Nurbaja* and *Anak dan Kemenakan* have a different social setting from, say, Abdul Muis' *Salah Asuhan* and N. St. Iskandar's *Karena Mentua*. Rusli's stories take

⁵⁸ Samsu's letter to Nurbaja, chapter VII, is dated 10th August 1896; Nurbaja is poisoned a year later (Samsu's suicide note to his father is dated 13th July 1897) and he dies as a result of his wounds "ten years later" (the title of chapter XIV).

place in the largest coastal town of Minangkabau, Padang. The stories of Muis and Iskandar are concerned with the people in the interior, the heartland of Minangkabau. While these two parts of Minangkabau share the same adat, as the ideal patterns of behaviour, they differ in their system of social stratification. Padang, unlike the interior, while maintaining its matrilineal social structure also developed a patrilineal aristocratic political system. The legitimacy of the aristocratic class is based on its political power. Its origin can be traced historically and relies on mythological justification. For this reason class consciousness and social stratification in Padang are much more pronounced than in the interior. The awareness of this distinction will give a deeper understanding of social issues reflected in the Minangkabau novels.

Mr. Aveling is right in his assertion that the plot of *Sitti Nurbaja* and the problems of adat in the book are not clearly related. But I do not see why he should use Maretin's models on the Minangkabau family in examining the characters' "code of behaviour". In the first place the models are based on some misleading assumptions on the Minangkabau family.¹ Secondly, by using the models, Mr. Aveling in effect makes Marah Rusli's characters into soulless particles.² The crucial adat issue in the book is not the "transformation" from the extended matrilineal family to the small patrilineal families, but rather the search for a way to maintain the harmony of two conflicting adat responsibilities — to one's own children and to one's sister's children. These responsibilities are recognized not only by the "modernist minded" Sutan Mahmud, Sjamsulbahri's father, but also by the "traditionally oriented" Puteri Rubiah. Chapter II clearly illustrates this conflict of responsibilities. In replying to his sister's accusation, Sutan Mahmud concedes that Sjamsulbahri is not his responsibility alone, but also that of his (Sjamsulbahri's) uncle. But since the latter is not a well-to-do person and has many other responsibilities, Sutan Mahmud, who is rich and a man of high position, is ashamed to burden his brother-in-law any further. Putri Rubiah, still accusing Sutan Mahmud of neglecting her daughter, bitterly laments: "If her father were still alive, he would certainly not let his daughter be like this, even if he had to pledge his head". This is the contrast between the

¹ For example, cf. Umar Junus: "Some Remarks on Minangkabau Social Structure" *B.K.I.*, 120, 3 (1964) pp. 315-319.

² The fascination with the model, has, perhaps, led Mr. Aveling to identify Rukiah, Sjamsulbahri's cousin, with Rapih, the young woman who died in childbirth. Rapih is one of Sutan Hamzah's wives, not his niece. Rusli apparently does not lose control over the plot.

good Sutan Mahmud, who realizes his two sets of responsibilities, and Putri Rubiah, who wants to monopolize her brother for her own (her daughter's) sake. This kind of conflict is not a new phenomenon.

Perhaps Mr. Aveling is right in assuming that as individuals the characters of *Sitti Nurbaja* are "essentially whole", but it should be emphasized that as conscious members of society they are certainly not "devoid of inner conflict". Only the villains, such as Datuk Meringgih, and the glory-intoxicated and irresponsible "traditionalists" such as Putri Rubiah and Sutan Hamzah can escape from their inner conflict. The good and understanding Sutan Mahmud has to repudiate his only and beloved son and the loving and devoted Sitti Nurbaja has to abandon Sjamsulbahri and marry the chief villain, Datuk Meringgih. Why? The answer cannot be found in the individuals themselves, in their awareness of the relationship to society and to each other. Sutan Mahmud is ashamed because Sjamsulbahri has betrayed the proper behaviour expected from him as son of a nobleman and as an educated youth. Sitti Nurbaja cannot face the fall of her father in society's esteem. It is Sutan Mahmud's social and moral obligation to educate Sjamsulbahri on proper behaviour and it is Nurbaja's duty to guard her father's honour. They are both victims of their social conscience. Their personal sacrifices are the genuine tragedies in the novel. Alimah, Nurbaja's cousin, on the other hand is successful — perhaps because of her impulsive temperament — in liberating herself by repudiating social decorum at the critical moment. Sjamsulbahri's inability to resolve his personal grief, caused by the death of Nurbaja and his mother, and his sense of eternal obligation to his father lead him to run away — searching for death. The problem of inherent conflict between man as an individual and as a member of society, which is a reflection of the Minangkabau social system, is by no means untypical of the Minangkabau literary tradition. Modern influences have only intensified this already immanent aspect of Minangkabau social life.

Marah Rusli, indeed, does not reject adat entirely. But what kinds of adat does he reject? The use of adat-classification, such as "*adat yang sebenarnja adat*", etc., does not help in understanding Rusli's attitude toward adat. It is relevant only in analyzing the continuing attempt of Minangkabau to formulate and reformulate its adat conceptions. Adat, as clearly shown in *Sitti Nurbaja*, is an elusive concept, which ranges from the ideal patterns of behaviour through actual social practices to the notion of acquiring personal and family glory (*kemegahan*). Marah Rusli bitterly attacks the latter aspect of adat and

makes Puteri Rubiah and her younger brother, Sutan Hamzah, into honour-seeking and irresponsible caricatures. But his description of Alimah's family is intended to explore the weaknesses and the strengths of the prevailing social practices. Alimah's father tries to draw a sharp contrast between what is essential and what is merely accidental in adat. The author affirms his belief in the validity of adat ideals, as guides for life. Bagindo Suleiman's advice to his daughter, Nurbaja, is simply a somewhat modernized form of adat ethical teachings, which can be found in the numerous adat aphorisms and adat books.

Two historical notes, usually ignored by the critics, might be relevant in furthering our understanding on the novel and its author. In 1906, when Marah Rusli was already seventeen years old, there was an intense anti-aristocratic movement in Padang. Launched by an adat-theoretician from the interior, who was known as "the father of Malay journalism", this movement repudiated the legitimacy of Padang aristocrats. To what extent, if any, might we ask: did this continuing movement influence Marah Rusli, who himself was an aristocrat? In 1922, when *Sitti Nurbaja* was first published, the conflict between the modernist *Kaum Muda* and the traditionalist *Kaum Kuno* or *Tua*, had been going on for almost a decade. Without elaborating any further, it is reasonable to suggest that *Sitti Nurbaja* reflects the mood of this period rather than the late nineteenth century.³

Marah Rusli seems to use his particular dates only to find a suitable historical event with which to end the life of Sjamsulbahri. This event, the anti-tax rebellion of 1908,⁴ provides the climax of the novel when Sjamsulbahri, in his search for death, not only kills his enemy, Datuk Meringgih, but also returns to his father and to his beloved home-town.

Finally, I cannot help but ask myself whether it is too much to expect of a literary critic a recognition of the importance of the social and historical background of a novel.

³ See Aveling's note (47). With a little historical understanding, Mr. Aveling might not give such comment to Prof. Johns' contention. Alimah in fact only repeats the contents of some Minangkabau weeklies, which began the feminist movement in the early 1910's. Marah Rusli became more involved in the *Kaum Muda* - *Kaum Tua* conflict in his *Anak dan Kemenakan*. Zuber Usman might be right in his assertion that this book was written in the same period as *Sitti Nurbaja*. See Zuber Usman, Marah Rusli - Pelopor Roman Indonesia Modern, *Kiblat*, 19, XV (March, 1968).

⁴ The title of Chapter XVI, "Ten years later", should be not taken too literally. Chapter XV is an accurate description of the mood during the scattered anti-tax rebellions.