Engaged Literature
An Examination of Social Issues Reflected in Contemporary Indonesian Literature

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Literature offers a unique way to peer into the collective consciousness. The aesthetic experience involves not only our cognitive abilities, but also our emotional sensibilities; it offers a window into social values and trends. Literature not only moves, entertains, and edifies, it also invites people to imagine other ways of living, to see alternative possibilities for their own lives and their own societies. In this way, literature has the power to inspire people to transform the world. Poems and prose can raise awareness and encourage resistance to injustice. Criticisms of socio-political life have appeared from the late colonial period through Suharto’s New Order in books, often republished, by a range of authors including Semaun (1899–1971), Mas Marco Kartodikromo (1890–1932), Wiji Tukul (1963–missing since 1998), W.S Rendra (1935–2009), and Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925–2006). Their works spoke on behalf of the marginalised, and criticised corrupt authorities. As literary historian Melani Budianta said, ‘fiction served as a means of voicing that which was silenced’ (Budianta 2009: 143–145).

One prominent theme in recent literature is the Tragedy of 1965, which refers the army’s annihilation of Indonesian Communist Party members, sympathisers, and many thousands of ordinary people in civil society. For decades after 1965, this history was virtually blacked out by authorities, and in schools and the media, people learned a sanitised, propaganda version of what happened. So, younger generations living in post-1998 Indonesia have become aware of the events of 1965 in part through literary works by writers who lived through that time and directly experienced its horrors. The flavour of the times is conveyed in novels and short stories such as Pulang (‘Home’) by Leila Chudori (born in 1962), Blues Merbabu by Bre Redana (born in 1957), Drupadi by Fajar Arcana (born in 1965) among others. But here I want to focus on other themes in contemporary Indonesian literature. Generally, the recent scene of contemporary Indonesian literature readership comes from diverse background, namely literary critics, university’s students, academics, researchers, journalists, and activists. This readership is supported by the major bookstore companies such as Gramedia and Gunung Agung, but now the appearances of online and indie bookstores also play an important role to extent the number of readers.

In ‘A many-headed Machine’, Henk Maier (2015) discusses Indonesian literature over generations, arguing that after 1970 it has become far more diverse in its methods and choice of themes than in previous decades.1 According to

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1 He identifies the emergence of several varieties, namely Islamic literature (sastra islam), literature of the interior (sastra pedalaman), cyber-literature (sastra dunia maya), regional literature (sastra regional), contextual literature (sastra kontekstual), fragrant literature (sastra wangi) and wild literature. See Maier 2015.
Maier, Indonesian literature has had a less explicitly nationalist focus, instead emphasising more personal themes and narrating the actualities of socio-economic matters, as in the work of Pramoedya Ananta Toer. The following review essay proposes a new mapping of socially engaged topics in Indonesian literature during the reformation era since President Suharto stepped down in 1998. I analyze contemporary literary work emerging in Indonesia in the context of social and political changes, changes both reflected in and inspired by the upheaval of these years. This context of socio-political turmoil, along with women’s voices, gender issues, and a new environmental awareness, has influenced the current style and mood of Indonesian literature. I investigate literary works that developed during the reformation era, and discern some of the emergent themes, at a time when, unlike the New Order period, freedom was celebrated. But these works do more than celebrate, so this essay also looks into the challenges, problems, and inspirations faced by the present generation of young Indonesian writers.

The essay is organised in three sections. The first part discusses recent works concerning how literature relates to present-day human rights problems, namely minority and civil rights in Indonesia. The second part looks at gender-related issues, which overlap with human rights violations, namely, women’s and LGBTiQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer) rights. Lastly, the essay explores the role of environmental issues in Indonesian current literary work. Environmental degradation is a pressing concern now in Indonesia. Some of the urgent issues are deforestation in Sumatra and Kalimantan, and the development of unsustainable practices that are destroying natural spaces and continue to encroach on animal habitat and threaten the survival of wildlife.

I focus on writing that took place in the wake of the reformation era, including many woman authors, beginning with Ayu Utami (born in 1968), who published her debut still under the New Order. In general, women writers in Indonesia are stereotyped, relegated to a single second class category, but this unfortunate and condescending labeling ignores the great richness and variety of contemporary writing by women. In the first section on ‘civil rights’, Okky Madasari (born in 1984, and a star of this generation), identifies urgent issues about religious freedom for the Ahmadiyya in Indonesia. Madasari also engages with gender issues, discussed in the subsequent section, where we find fellow author Djenar Maesa Ayu, who in Menyusu Ayah (‘Sucking Father’s Milk’), addresses rape and sexual violence in Indonesia through a compelling and
unconventional narration. Lastly, I look at writing about nature that reflects on how people are enduring the disappearance of natural spaces and the fading of traditional ways of life. The writers discussed are Made Adnyana Ole (born in 1968), Oka Rusmini (born in 1967), Guntur Alam (born in 1986), Gus TF Sakai (born in 1965), Damhuri Muhammad (born in 1974), and Esha Tegar Putra (born in 1985).

Politics, Religion and Civil Rights

Okky Puspa Madasari was born in Magetan Regency, East Java. She studied Political Science at Gadjah Mada University in 2005, and Sociology at the University of Indonesia, finishing her Master’s degree with a thesis called ‘Genealogy of Indonesian Novels: Capitalism, Islam, and Critical Literature.’ As a novelist, she is known as a realist who deeply portrays political and social conditions in Indonesia, a likely result of her early occupation as a journalist. She was a co-founder of and is currently involved in the ASEAN Literary Festival, which promotes literary awareness among youth in Indonesia and the Southeast Asia region. She was the youngest author to win the Khatulistiwa (Kusala) Literary Award (KLA) for her second novel Maryam, which centres on the experience of an oppressed minority, the Ahmadiyya.

All around Indonesia, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community have been suffering from persecution by Muslim extremists. According to The Association of Religion Data Archives, there are approximately 400,000 Ahmadiyya in Indonesia. Members of the Ahmadiyya community suffer from banning and closure of their mosques. Muslim extremists have also expelled them from their homes and workplaces. The worst atrocity occurred in Cikeusik, Banten back in 2011, when a throng of aggressors burned and destroyed Ahmadiyya properties, and violently tortured and killed six Ahmadiyya (Wadrianto 2011). Those convicted for committing the Cikeusik tragedy got a lenient prison sentences, serving barely six months (Adriyanto 2011). This kind of violence, and the institutions that encourage or tolerate it, shapes contemporary Indonesia in many ways, and in turn influences our literature. We can see it in Okky Madasari’s work, such as Entrok (Madasari 2010) which was translated and published in English as The Years of Voiceless (Madasari 2013b), and Maryam (Madasari 2012), translated as The Outcast (Madasari 2014).

Maryam by Okky Madasari captures the essence of the Ahmadiyya’s pain living as a minority in Indonesia. Inspired by Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s style, Madasari captures a social realism and presents sympathetic main characters who are strong and courageous. In Maryam, the eponymous heroine is a female
Ahmadiyya, tormented by the dilemma of understanding her own faith. The novel explores two major problems through related storylines; both are social and political, albeit in different ways. One is more personal, familial, and cultural, involving Maryam’s psychological growth and conflicts as a young woman being raised in Ahmadiyya traditions. The other is more communal and institutional as it enumerates and represents with great sympathy and insight how the Indonesian government treats the Ahmadiyya.

Young Maryam struggles as she is constantly judged a deviant girl by her schoolmates and peers. But the close relation and affection she enjoys with her Ahmadiyya community enables her to maintain dignity in herself and Ahmadiyya religious and cultural beliefs. And it seemed for a time that she would follow tradition, and marry a fellow Ahmadiyya. But she is torn. Eventually Maryam decides to flee her hometown of Lombok, to continue her degree in Surabaya, and after a long grueling debate with her parents, she chooses to marry a non-Ahmadiyya and to live in Jakarta. Maryam defends her love that caused her to be expelled from her family and the rest of Ahmadiyya community. But after marrying Alam, she experiences discrimination from her husband and mother-in-law, who view Ahmadiyya religious values as heresy. They demand Maryam quit Ahmadiyya and practice the dominant Muslim ideals. No matter where she goes, it seems, her problems of acceptance continue. Hurt, alienated, and frustrated, Maryam divorces her husband and goes back to her hometown in West Nusa Tenggara, hoping to find support. But there she finds that her family and the rest of Ahmadiyya community in the village have been evicted. After desperately searching for them, she eventually finds them living cramped in a refugee camp, where they have been for several years. Maryam struggles to help, but the Indonesian government responds with indifference and bureaucracy to the community’s demands for justice and compensation for their loss and displacement.

Madasari shows in vivid detail the discrimination faced by Ahmadiyya today. They suffer at the hands of Muslim hard-liners who seek to ban, punish, and ultimately erase Ahmadiyya culture, but as Madasari makes clear, these practices are abetted directly by an Indonesian government that refuses to uphold their rights. So Ahmadiyya endure a sort of double oppression, and face cruel choices. ‘They give two options: quit being Ahmadiyya and back to the right path; or leave this place immediately. On the third day, 17 houses are burnt. The residents decide to leave their homes and give up their lands’ (Madasari 2013: 51). In various ways, she also shows how anti-Ahmadiyya discrimination

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3 All quotations are translations by the author of this essay, from the Indonesian original into English.
occurs in educational institutions. Maryam’s sister, Fatima, was unjustly treated by her teacher because of her Ahmadi identity, and when her father objected, he was ignored. And the teachers merely reflect the dominant powers today in Indonesian society. ‘Maryam’s sister’s score has annotations in her report card: “Ahmadiyya’s Children.” Now, her religious value score is no longer 8 or 9 (out of 10). Her teacher gives Fatima 5’ (Madasari 2013: 73). Madasari urges the government to enforce its own laws against theft and murder, and to protect Ahmadiyya as a minority group. A very specific, narrow, and politicised Islam is beginning to eclipse not only other religious faiths and local cultural practices, but other Islamic traditions as well. But sometimes ethnic or geographic difference marks one too deeply to ultimately gain acceptance in the dominant society, and difference continues to expose one to ongoing discrimination based on affiliation with a place or ethnic group. Maryam in this context tells the story of minorities fighting for their rights. Maryam uncovers the severe consequences caused by the government’s omission to protect one minority against violence.

Madasari has always shown a strong concern for problems of injustice and human rights in Indonesia. From her debut Entrok, she has exposed the New Order government’s human rights violations. One of the most insidious aspects of these violations, Madasari shows, is how ordinary they have become, how much they are tolerated by society, and even rendered largely invisible to the general public. Madasari depicts the lives of two generations of women, though the mother and daughter characters of Marni and Rahayu. Marni is a tough, hard-working, illiterate woman, who spends her whole life in Singget, a small village in Central Java. She is raised in a poor family, causing her to abandon her childhood life and begin working in the market. Over the course of years, she trains herself to be an independent and disciplined woman, and although poor, gains a certain economic foothold. Rahayu is born in better circumstances, and influenced by strong Islamic religious values, she comes to detest her mother’s devotion to ancestor rites, and deems it heresy. This is more than mere passive generational divide, but illustrates the social, religious, and political forces in the country today. Despite what powerfully separates them, for instance, Marni and Rahayu both understand that they have been oppressed by the Indonesian military and other powerful mainstream institutions.

In the post 1965 era, anyone affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party was considered a traitor and criminal, and often marked for death. Entrok shows in personal ways and in devastating detail how the terror operated systematically. Civilians were afraid to fight back against the military, since any sort of protest would further threaten their lives. In the novel, fearful civilians submit to their oppression at the hands of the military and bureaucrats. Rahayu
defends a community fighting against the military for their lands, but in the end, she loses her battle, and the military detains her as a ‘subversive’. When she is finally released from prison, she is given a new identity, marking her as an Ex-Political Prisoner (Eks-Tapol/ET). During the New Order, most civilians with a sign of ET on their identity cards would not have the access to a workplace and education. They became pariahs, rejected by the society. Marni and Rahayu discuss these dynamics.

“But how would an ex-prisoner be able to work, Mother?”
“This sign is only on my Identification Card, Mother. It is a mark for a person who has been in jail like me.”
“Like the PKI? I know the ex-PKI. They have got signs in their identification cards. They cannot be proper employees. They would never have a comfortable life, and they would be poor for the rest of their lives”.

MADASARI 2010: 274–275

Equal access to work, education, and health should be protected by the government. Those rights are clearly stated in the Indonesian Constitution of 1945, yet the military has often acted above the law. Criticism of the government and military has led to punishment, and opposition to official policies was not tolerated. Hundreds of thousands of people were affected. Entrok personalises some common experiences through Marni and Rahayu, who endure state violence.

Though fiction, Madasari presents a moving and sympathetic portrayal of the victims of New Order violence. Official accounts in newspapers and history books were denied or outright censored, but fictional accounts, works of the imagination, have begun to seep into the culture. Through literature, Madasari breaks the silence of fear. What has been erased purposely or even forgotten is being resurrected through literature. From the tales of Marni and Rahayu, new generations are learning about the atrocities conducted by their past government. Madasari’s narrative is also a form of retelling history, hoping not merely to remind people what happened but to reshape popular memory of events that have been denied or misrepresented.

Public reception for Entrok and Maryam has been critically as well as commercially successful. Madasari’s work also raised attention in Indonesia’s larger newspapers (Hari 2010; Wibowo 2010).
Gender Justice

Many contemporary authors focus on women’s experience, and explore the various ways women are oppressed in Indonesian society. A common leitmotif is the obsessive control and punishment of women bodies. The historically taboo subject of rape has begun to appear with increasing frequency and frankness. Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s *Bumi Manusia* (*The Earth of Mankind*, 1975; 2005) and Eka Kurniawan’s *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* (*Just As Vengeance, Longing Must Be Settled*, 2014) both address this explosive topic, as do Djenar Maesa Ayu’s short story, ‘Menyusu Ayah’ (‘Sucking Father’s Milk’, 2003) and her *Pasung Jiwa* (*Bonded Soul*, 2013). As fiction has been able to subtly and quietly offer critiques of the military and New Order governments that have been proscribed from newspapers and history books, so fiction has also begun to address and explore the condition of women in ways otherwise forbidden, outlawed, or frowned on. And because fiction exists in a speculative mode, created and read through the imagination, it is able to enter the subjectivity of women’s experience in ways that news and documentary cannot. Herein lies its special value as a social tool. While fiction should not be seen as a substitute for legal recourse to crimes or for the official historical record, it can help to raise popular consciousness and to foment social movements. Even in today’s Indonesia, which is crowded with social media and digital images, fiction has a role to play.

Outside the realm of fiction, sexualised violence is slowly beginning to be recognised as a serious problem in contemporary Indonesia. In 2014, the Indonesian Women’s National Commission (Komisi Nasional Perempuan Indonesia) recorded 293,220 cases of sexual violence against women and children (Komnas Perempuan 2015). These numbers are based on what was officially reported, but because of the many barriers to reporting, including the fear of reprisals, social stigma, and other repercussions, the number of actual cases is likely much higher. The situation is clearly alarming, and many contemporary Indonesian writers have begun to address it. In 2014, the Indonesian Women’s National Commission proposed a bill called The Elimination of Sexual Violence, which failed to pass in the congress. This setback disappointed advocates for women’s rights—the government’s refusal to recognise the urgency of the issue seemed truly demoralising. That is one reason why works by writers such as Djenar Maesa Ayu matter so much. She is creating a space for the victims to share their experience and to speak their frustration.

Her writing, however, goes deeper than polemic and mere political rhetoric. It confronts uneasy topics with candor, and explores upsetting psychological ambiguities as it denounces patriarchal institutions. Djenar Maesa Ayu was
born in 1973 and has become a leading voice in her generation against sexual violence. In 2015, she even expanded her creative expression to a film, ‘Nay’, which she directed. But it is her fiction that has gained her widespread attention and admiration. Though her subjects are often harrowing and rebarbitative, her literary writing is beautiful and provocitive. In ‘Sucking Father’s Milk’ (2004), Ayu tells the story of Nayla, a young girl who endured prolonged abuse from her father in an incestuous relationship. In 2002, this work won the prize for best short story from the Indonesian feminist journal, Jurnal Perempuan. This work eloquently elaborates a personal story of sexual violence and society’s treatment of it, which tends to ignore the problem and cast doubt and shame on victims. She insightfully represents patriarchal family dynamics, and explores with great psychological nuance the girl’s evolving relationship with her father. Her explicit language and simple, direct style have struck readers as both shocking and moving. ‘My name is Nayla’ she announces. ‘I’m a girl, but I’m no weaker compared to the boys. Because I did not suck Mother’s nipple, I sucked Father’s penis. And I did not suck mother’s milk. I sucked Father’s semen’ (Djenar Maesa Ayu 2004: 36–37). Part of what gets under the reader’s skin is how convincing the voice is—this is indeed the way a young girl might speak of this kind of violation. The description is doubly shocking because not only does she explicitly characterise what is supposed to never be mentioned, she also declares it without shame. When it is permissible to acknowledge victimhood today, the victims are supposed to be demure and discreet, not bold, honest, and strong. Though she has been abused, Nayla’s voice is not weak and cowering, but forthright. Indonesian society does not often acknowledge this kind of voice from a young girl, nor, in fact, from grown women. It is this character’s voice as much as the subject matter that is so excitingly feminist.

‘Sucking Father’s Milk’ is disturbing in many ways. At first, Nayla is oblivious to her father’s abuse precisely because she doesn’t immediately understand it as abuse. Like many children, she trusts and seeks the approval of her parents. Acts that please her father and bring more intimacy with him give her a pleasure that she willingly consents to. She recounted innocently how her father had been touching her and teaching her how to give him oral sex. But as she matured, her father lost his interest in her, like many pedophiles do as their victims’ age. To Nayla, this felt like a double betrayal: not only a rejection of intimacy with her father, but as she came to understand what she had been participating in, she was stung by the violation of her trust, innocence, and love. This swirling mix of emotions is extremely volatile—both for the character and for the reader. Djenar Maesa Ayu hauntingly conveys the conflicts that emerge from this intimacy and her gradual understanding of the cruel betrayal of that
intimacy. Because she recounts a complex story that does not fit how we might think of victims and abusers, and does so with outstanding writing, the story is as moving as it is controversial.

Some of this controversy has appeared in print. For instance, Damhuri Muhammad refutes the label of Djenar Maesa Ayu as a pornographic and immoral author, describing how her work is being grouped as Sastra Seks ‘Sex Literature’. To see her fiction as purely erotic or sex literature perhaps the severity of today’s patriarchal climate. Though it contains graphic descriptions of sexual acts, ‘Sucking Father’s Milk’ is clearly not intended to excite or titillate readers. Similarly, human rights reports of rape and torture carried out by the military often contain explicit descriptions, though the intent is certainly not to tantalize readers. Djenar Maesa Ayu’s story makes abundantly clear the physical suffering and psychological trauma that a young girl faces when repeatedly raped by her own father as well as other men. As Nayla matures and comes to understand what she has been through, she grows disgusted, withdrawn, melancholic, and furious. She begins to understand as well that her experience takes place in a community and a context dominated by men. In one passage, Nayla viscerally perceives a connection between patriarchy and penises, and expresses anger and revulsion in the stark, plain language of a young girl.

I felt something warm bursting inside my private part. But I have lost the desire to suck it. All of a sudden my stomach felt sick. I’m sick whenever imagining Father’s penis. Sick, imagining my friends penises. Sick, imagining the penis of my father’s friends. And I’m sick imagining his penis being inside my private part.

Djenar Maesa Ayu 2004: 42

Ayu’s use of explicit language is never merely to shock, but always to serve multiple purposes—not only to move reader and develop character, but also to critique social and political institutions. Literature both reflects and affects the world, as so much of contemporary fiction in Indonesia has shown. Consciousness and activism around gender issues form an important part of that.

Besides Djenar Maesa Ayu, another current woman writer deserving attention is Ida Ayu Oka Rusmini, commonly known as Oka Rusmini, a senior journalist living in Bali. In addition to her work as a journalist, she has published prolifically in many genres, including the novel Tarian Bumi (Earth Dance, 2007). Strongly grounded in contemporary Indonesian culture and politics, her language is always sensual and her themes often feminist, exploring issues of gender, sexuality, and the body. She also has a strong ecological sensibility which seems part and parcel of her sensual style and feminist leanings. Earth
Dance explores women’s yearning to be free from repressive Balinese customs and traditions in a story about dancers. The characters struggle for independence from the rigid demands and expectations of a patriarchal society. The unforgiving and inflexible aspects of tradition contrast with the easy and graceful movement of dance, and the natural impulses of the body. Oka Rusmini does not shy away from sexuality, and her work is unabashedly erotic.

Like Rusmini, Okky Madasari explores the fluid and ambiguous aspects of gender. Her novels not only deal with social and political issues, but do so in riveting and artful fiction, and through queer protagonists who are strong, resilient characters. Madasari is an accomplished writer who was nominated for the Khatulistiwa Literary Award in 2014, and in 2012 won the prize for her second book, Maryam. Pasung Jiwa (Bonded Soul, 2013), Madasari’s third novel, follows Sasana, the ambiguously gendered main character, on her arduous quest for freedom. Sasana was brought up as a boy and has male genitals, but from childhood felt uncomfortable in his culturally and biologically assigned gender. At one point, Sasana laments, ‘Ah, the more I’m disappointed being born as a man’ (Madasari 2013: 44). But here is Sasana at the beginning of the novel describing her feelings.

My whole life is a trap. My body is the first trap. Then, my parents, and everybody I knew. Then everything I knew, everything that I have done. Everything is an entrapment arranged all through my life. Everything captured me, bonded me, towering walls that have become the trap for the thirty years span of my life.

OKKY MADASARI 2013: 9

Pasung Jiwa gives a poignant sense of the interior life of sexual minorities like Sasana, who face such discrimination and violence in Indonesia. In doing so, the novel humanises figures like her for a wider audience, literally giving voice and visibility to the kind of person dominant society tends to ignore, marginalise, and despise. To just barely illustrate how this fits in the daily Indonesian context, in 2015 and 2016, LGBTI meetings, rallies, and discussions have been ambushed by religious fundamentalists, and other hateful groups have been ambushed by religious fundamentalists, and other hateful groups have targeted non-profit organisations such as OurVoice and Arus Pelangi that demand equal job opportunities, and state protection from violence and discrimination.

Sasana’s journey of understanding her sexuality begins with an encounter with CakJek, a drifter who likes dangdut music, which Sasana also enjoys. Through dangdut, Sasana finds an ability to express her longing to express herself as she truly feels and begins to assume the outward identity of someone who is not strictly bound by traditional gender roles.

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the world sees and celebrates as a woman. Through the exhilaration of *dangdut* music, Sasana longs to move sexually, carelessly, and with grace. Okky Madasari underlines the desire of the body to be free, and how this desire cannot be accessed or understood by ordinary, banal experience. Societal norms also dull one’s senses. But music and movement open one’s consciousness, enable one to see the world and understand oneself in new ways. That this happens for Sasana through *dangdut* is so meaningful because this deeply traditional cultural form allows her to challenge another entrenched tradition that of rigid gender norms. For this character, as for many people in the world, gender identity feels flexible, and Sasana does not wish to be female instead of male, but to express herself as female and male. Through a powerful passion for *dangdut* and for dance, and with the encouragement from CakJek, Sasana begins to dress as a woman and feel more comfortable in her fluctuating identity. She describes her transformation.

I am Sasa, the twin sister of Sasana. We are twins, but we are different. We are one in body, but we are two souls. We do not negate each other. We are a couple of souls always longing to each other. Being two is not a mistake. Being one is not a necessity. Sasana does have a penis, but Sasa has a hole and nipple. Sasa sings and dances, Sasana whistles and play drum. We are one, but we are two. We are two, but we are one.

MADASARI 2013: 232–233

As a young woman, Sasa has the cheerfulness and demeanor of a lady *dangdut* entertainer, singing and dancing in a tight dress and red lipstick. The story has a happy ending, which instead of seeming cliché, comes off as heroic and exciting. CakJek asks Sasa to travel again performing street music, romantically carried on by a passion for *dangdut* and the thrill of freedom.

Environment

The sorts of victories and setbacks, and the tensions between contemporary modern life and the traditional, play out not only in the realm of gender and women’s experience. In recent years, Indonesia has been faced with numerous environmental crises, and both writers and social movements are responding to the grave situation. The country confronts disastrous consequences from reckless industrialisation. Sumatran and Kalimantan air pollution cause severe respiratory problems and, as in China, this has begun to even take a toll on the economy. Indonesia’s forests are disappearing, replaced by factories and
mining sites. In countless communities across the nation, in both subtle and massively disruptive ways, industry is disrupting traditional ways of life. The very air we breathe and the food we eat are affected. Local farmers have been displaced and small scale agriculture is regularly outsourced to multinational companies, but against the odds, people resist. In 2014, for instance, Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia (WALHI, The Indonesian Forum for Environment) reported 472 cases of farmers against developers (National Geographic 2015). One well-known group of women farmers in Rembang, Central Java has been defending mount Kendeng from cement miners, and has refused any compensation offered by the company (Mongabay Indonesia 2015a). Instead, they favour mountain preservation, since Mount Kendeng is seen as a sacred place, and money is less valuable to them than the ecosystem sustained by Mount Kendeng. Institutions like the IMF and the World Bank tell inspiring stories about the growth of Indonesian GDP, impressive reductions in poverty, and rising ‘middle classes’. But along with environmental destruction, which is often ignored or minimised, huge populations of people have been displaced and marginalised to make way for this economic growth. ‘Development’ is having a deep impact on all aspects of contemporary Indonesian life, from the natural world to daily experience. The water we drink, cultural traditions, where and how we work, community and familial relationships, gender, sexuality, and so much more: these have been transformed by ‘globalisation’, that seemingly anodyne and inevitable process we in the ‘developing world’ are told is synonymous with progress. The effects of these many changes have become so widespread, powerful, and entrenched that now they appear in Indonesian literature.

Indonesian writers decry the rapacious treatment of the natural world, and this is conveyed in various ways and through a variety of themes. Indonesian literature today reflects anxiety towards losing Indonesia’s wilderness and wildlife and an ambivalence toward aspects of contemporary life, with its seductive speed and apparent convenience, its glittering technology and global appetite. We see these concerns in short stories by authors such as Guntur Alam, Gus TF Sakai, and Damhuri Muhammad. Guntur Alam’s ‘Harimau Belang’ (‘Tiger’, in Kompas, 2015) tells the story of a territorial conflict between wild animals and people of a fictional village called Tanah Abang. A mystified tiger goes on a rampage, devouring the village’s cattle and a little boy. Before being targeted by the village people, all tigers were considered sacred in Tanah Abang; they revered tigers as manifestations of their ancestors, or Puyang. They were living in a peaceful territorial balance, but modernisation brought problems to the village. Disappearing forests means the loss of habitat for wildlife, which provokes Puyang to hunt beyond his boundaries. After centuries of liv-
ing in a sacred balance between the wilderness, tigers, village people, and the spiritual beliefs of Puyang, just a few years of industrial life managed to destroy. Industrialisation altered that delicate harmony. The story shows how progress and modernisation have caused not merely the destruction of the natural life, bad as that is. What has been far more devastating is the elimination of that sacred bond between humans and the natural world, between traditional villages and the forests and animals that once surrounded them. It is terrible when a magnificent animal like a tiger is killed, when wild habitat is cut down or poisoned, and when a beloved person dies. But the sorrow is less if one trusts that there are other tigers, that habitat can grow again, and the beloved’s descendants will continue living. When an entire way of life vanishes, however, the tragedy seems much more difficult to bear, the loss more searing, deeper, and permanent. Languages, music, dance, beliefs, (not merely ‘superstition’, but ways of healing, growing plants, and more) ways of seeing and knowing the world; once these are gone, they are gone forever. One of the characters in Guntur Alam’s ‘Tiger’, dazed by the vastness of what has changed, what was lost, looks at the landscape and reflects.

That woman instantly remembered that thousands of acres of forest were gone. Their trees were being cut down and made into paper pulps. Not only the forests were devastated, ever since that BHT paper factory came four years ago, the water of Lematang River has become murky.

GUNTUR ALAM 2015: 9–16

Damhuri Muhammad and Gus TF Sakai’s short stories explore other aspects of the massive changes brought about by the new, glitzy, global industrial life. They focus less on a lament for what has been lost but explore the arrogance of our modern life and views. Many of these stories seem a little like fable but they have didactic qualities and often instruct readers with specific lessons. Gus TF Sakai’s Beras Segenggam (A Handful of Rice, 2014) tells the story of Keramat Ako, a figure respected by the village people for his wise teachings inspired from nature. He compels the village people to live within the principals inspired from nature, tells them nature seeks to sustain and care for all creatures. Keramat Ako is not only a nickname given by the villagers to their hallowed teacher. ‘Keramat Ako’ means sacred or powerful mind, and is a subtle critique of the supposed reason and rationality of modern life that has led to so many problems. Keramat Ako forbids the villagers from cutting the trees to avoid flood and landslide in Coro Hills, things which have been carried out by multinationals in the name of progress, the ‘rational’ logic of economic growth, and the wisdom of the market. Instead of frantically chasing profits and sup-
posed advancement, Keramat Ako advocates for a slower life, one embracing traditions, and eschews modern equipment like tractors. ‘Keramat Ako says; the land needs a rest, nature requires time to restore balance’ (Gus TF Sakai, 2015: 158–165). The didactic messages are literally spelled out, and the story clearly reflects a nostalgia for an imagined past. Sakai’s Sumatran colleague Damhuri Muhammad expresses similar admiration for the simple life of farming in his work. For instance, in Banun, the main character is a revered old woman who lives a traditional life. Here she shares her enthusiasm, her life’s mission as a farmer.

On that moment Banun unveiled her life’s secret to her children, including Rimah, her youngest. She explained the word “tani” (farming) was originated from the word tahani, if it is translated into today’s understanding, it means self-restrain.

**Muhammad 2015: 26**

Apart from the artistic value of these stories, I emphasise more on their social values, to read them in today’s cultural context and realities. The fact that there are writers creating this sort of work, and a public (however small) reading it, suggests that there is a social climate eager for such messages. Environmentalism is clearly part of the Indonesian zeitgeist.

These environmental messages also appear in contemporary poetry. Fellow Sumatran Esha Tegar Putra expresses the anguish felt with the annual noxious smog caused by forests burned in order to clear the landscape for the palm oil industry. 2015 had the worst levels of air pollution in Riau, Jambi, South Sumatra, as well as in West, Central, and South Kalimantan. The long drought and the delayed rainy season made the smog even more intense than in other recent years. According to the Indonesian Health Ministry, there were thousands cases of respiratory infection, hundreds suffered from pneumonia and asthma, as well as eye pain and skin pain (Mongabay Indonesia 2015b). Esha Tegar Putra writes

We are being poisoned by the haze, my wife,
You are complaining of itchy eyes, asthma, and nose burn
As if inhaling the smoke from a thousand stoves when their axis are out of oils

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4 Originally published in Muhammad 2010 and re-published in Muhammad 2015, discussed in this review essay.
I said the ghost of mighty jungle of Riau
With jaw scorched and stomach filled with ember
Peats are spattering from their nests
Group of devout people from Siak are praying
Asking for rainfalls for the next three days and nights
Soldiers carrying pumps and water hose
Gallantly deployed from the city
The Rainmaker with his underpants worn inside out
Continuously reading mantras above the coconut tree

“Alas, the ghost of mighty jungle of Riau, dear
It is as if the children are being born inside of a chimney with black lungs!”

We are being poisoned by the haze, my wife.
And you are starting to complain a cough coming from your stomach.

ESHA TEGAR PUTRA 2015: 10

Similar problems exist in Bali. Rice fields, or Sawah, are dwindling today. Bali, the island once famous for its agriculture, currently is losing its picturesque rice fields. Green lush rice fields are replaced with private villas, luxurious hotels, and shopping centres. Shockingly, farming has nearly vanished as a profession and a way of life in Bali. Could there be a more potent symbol of a dying traditional community, of a relentlessly greedy system literally destroying the landscape, air, and water in the name of profits and progress? Rice is more than a mere commodity: the cultivation of rice is a way of life in Bali. The rice field and its traditional irrigation system (Subak) form part of an elaborate practice and tradition that goes back thousands of years. Anthropologist J. Stephen Lansing explains that the water temples in the rice fields have practical functions to indicate the flow of water, but it has also social and cosmological roles (Lansing 2007 [1991]: 128). More than simply using the land to produce food and/or earn a profit, the rice paddy has deep cultural and religious importance. Balinese, who are predominantly Hindu, believe in living in accordance with nature, and based on the traditional philosophy of Tri Hita Karana,5 farming is seen as cooperating with nature. The Mex-

5 Tri Hita Karana translates as three causes of well-being. It is a Balinese philosophy governing the intricate relationship between oneself, nature, and God.
ican artist Marco Covarrubias (2008 [1937]; 58–79), who in the 1930s studied the rites and complex festivals to worship the rice goddess within this agriculture tradition, notes that the goddess is praised with multiple names, Sang Hyang Sri, Sang Hyang Pertiwi, Dewi Cili, and Dewi Sri. But this ancient way of living is gradually vanishing. Tabanan-born poet Made Adnyana Ole expresses distress with this situation in a poem titled *Dewi Padi* (The Goddess of Rice).

The goddess of rice,
True lover to all living beings
One day soon, plowing her own earth
Alongside the sacred cow, and heartfelt water
Meanwhile my children

Who usually play flutes
From the aching pit of rice paddy’s stem

Now catching storks feathers and grasshopper
Falling from the sky
How can they grow?
When the season always denies them

But truthfully, where do You come from Goddess?
While all fairy tales today,
Beseech you to come home to olden monuments
To cradles of hearts which I adore

Let the grasshopper teases the season,
Storks coming home. And My children
Playing in the trench

Goddess of rice
One day soon, telling fairy tale to herself
About all that no longer exist.

MADE ADNYANA OLE, 2014: 31

Environmental writing is not limited to genre or gender. Oka Rusmini may be largely known for her bold erotic novels and advocacy for women (mentioned in this essay’s section on gender), but she is also an accomplished poet. She has a powerful environmental consciousness and frequently decries the unsus-
tainable tourism in Bali. In her award winning poetry anthology, *Saiban*, she writes

> They kept on coming, growing foreign concrete trees, locking all doors.  
> I remember when I was married to the sea, my eyes were closed, in a  
> beautiful unfamiliar embrace, my body was slimy and full of sap.  
> Now, I no longer found those green rice paddy fields, dusty fragrant soil,  
> sound of bicycles pedalled joyfully.  
> We were going to meet the ocean, now there are only street vendors,  
> grains of sands full of trash.

*Oka Rusmini 2014: 23*

Oka Rusmini is one of the pioneers in speaking out about safeguarding Bali against the dangers of globalization. She has a unique way of capturing Bali’s nature in her poetry, beginning with *Patiwangi*, published in 2003. ‘The Tree Monologue’, for instance, shows how nature inspires tradition, as does ‘Land of Bali’, which contains the lines

> Maybe the land of Bali does not have the trace of ancestors in your eyes
> Or life that never teaches you about beauty
> Leaves that have been picked by ancestors on the side of Badung river
> Never they tell you the story of genealogy

It is not only faceless multinational companies that are to blame. Balinese people, too, participate in the mad destruction of the environment. Oka Rusmini criticises fellow Balinese for selling their land for easy money, without bothering to consider its deeper value to communities, or its significance in the history and future of the nation and the planet. In a voice full of rage and sorrow, she writes ‘History has lost its greatness, because you no longer recognised your land’. Recently she has been fighting to protect the Benoa Bay from reclamation for a tourism mega project. She was invited to Hamburg, and at Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg, she spoke alongside two other Balinese poets, Putu Oka Sukanta and Cok Sawitri (Tempo.co. 2015). They explained to the audience how the uncontrollable development in Bali is not attuned with Balinese values, nature, and tradition. Indonesian authors combine engaged writing with socio-political activism not only in their work, but by speaking out in public forums, both inside the country and internationally.

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6 Oka Rusmini won the award for best poetry in the *Kusala Sastra Khatulistiwa* in 2014.
Conclusion

The samples of prose and poetry explored here help to understand what some of the important issues percolating in Indonesia today, in cities and villages, on large and small scales, across the archipelago nation. On the social level, there have been victories and losses, of course, bad news as well as good, and on the literary level, though there is better and worse writing, there has been a notable amount of experimentation. Above all, it must be stressed that, in sharp contrast with the New Order period, where censorship ruled the day, there is more openness to express ideas, and some challenges are tolerated. The authors publishing in the past several decades represent a diverse sample of writing today, in terms of gender, ethnicity, subject matter, theme, style, influence, generational outlook, and literary quality. Some wrote across regime changes, while others grew up, and have been shaped by the reformational years after Suharto stepped down in 1998. But they all share deep concern for the social world we share. And if they appear to heavily focus on personal themes, we should recall that ‘the personal is political’, as an earlier generation of feminists taught us. One objective of this essay was to look at how some of this focus on personal themes translated to, reflected, and helped inspire social movements. Literary works have the potential to influence the Indonesian social imagination, by suggesting other possible ways of organising society, and by highlighting the personal and environmental tolls taken on society through the current ways of doing things. Literature also helps to humanise figures that the dominant society ignores or despises. This can have subtle but powerful effects. Not only can literature help ‘give voice to the voiceless’, as is often said, but personalising stories of discrimination against people and communities makes it harder to alienate them, and thus harder to oppress or outright kill them.

References


