The City, the Body, and the World of Things

* A Microhistory of New Order Jakarta’s Accelerated Modernization

Sony Karsono | orcid: 0000-0001-6493-0766
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Yongin, South Korea

kars@hufs.ac.kr

Abstract

In late New Order Indonesia, industrialization generated among Jakarta’s intellectuals a sense of entrapment in an ‘onrushing century’ where the storm of progress had thrown their life into turmoil. What did it mean for them to find their urban experiences structured by this turmoil, which poet Afrizal Malna called an ‘architecture of rain’? Sensing that corporeal and material history may hold the key to this question, I look into why a section of New Order Jakarta’s intellectual class felt they were leading a hyper-fast, overheated life, and how they tried to come to terms with it. Focusing on thing-centred and embodied experiences, I use the tension between Jakarta’s social history and Afrizal Malna’s biography and literary work to spark a different understanding of contemporary Indonesian urbanism.

Keywords

Indonesia – Jakarta – Afrizal Malna – urbanism – urban studies – embodiment – embodied history

1 Introduction

Sometime in 2010, to a group of student writers in Surakarta, Central Java, Afrizal Malna (b. 1957), one of Indonesia’s major poets, said: ‘[A]ll my poems are [about] Jakarta.’

Indonesian writers—such as Chairil Anwar (1922–1949), W.S. Rendra (1935–2009), Ajip Rosidi (1938–2020), and Yudhistira Massardi (b. 1954)—have published poems featuring Jakarta as a setting or a nonhuman character. What matters is this: Jakarta was the cultural mother that gave birth to Afrizal the artist and the bulk of his literary work. A force he can neither deny nor shake off, the city dogs him wherever he goes; Jakarta ‘has taken up abode in [him]’, ‘inhabiting [his] body’ (Malna 2013; Nikmah 2018:43). From the mid 1980s to the late 1990s, Jakarta—a mercurial ecosystem bristling with expressive energy—moved Afrizal to craft a body of poetry and fiction that not merely has established his reputation, stature, and voice but also offers glimpses into the often-overlooked cultural ménage à trois between literature, the human body, and the material world (Malna 2009).

A forest of symbols in Afrizal’s New Order poetry and short fiction is worth exploring for clues to a puzzle in Indonesia’s urban history: what would life in Soeharto’s Jakarta look like from the standpoint of city dwellers’ thing-centred, bodily experiences? Such experiences ranged from the ways Jakartans moved and the multisensory worlds they roamed (ones born of the interusions of light-, sound-, smell-, taste-, and touchscapes) to the powerful artefacts they used and were used by. People’s bodily and material encounters with Jakarta show what it meant to live in a metropolis undergoing a pragmatic, authoritarian modernization, whose instruments included the massacres of 1965–1966, high-growth economic strategy, rapid industrialization, repressive depoliticization, and a paranoid war on ideologies (Moertopo 1973; B. Anderson 2001; Heryanto 2008).

Soeharto’s Jakarta and Afrizal Malna’s life, poetry, and fiction form a constellation that one can use as a prism to analyse the city dweller’s bodily and material engagement with New Order modernity. To do so is to practise microhistory: conducting a single, small case-study to illuminate—rather than generalize about—a major historical phenomenon (Robisheaux 2017:9–11). Microhistory’s revelatory potential has been demonstrated in much research. Consider political scientist Marshall Berman’s (1988:131–71) treatment of Charles Baudelaire’s poetry as historical evidence for probing into the experience of capitalist modernity in nineteenth-century Paris; sociologist Richard Sennett’s (1994:317–54) use of E.M. Forster’s novel Howards End as a keyhole through which to examine the embodied experience of city life in Edwardian London; and historian William H. Frederick’s (1997:54–89) study of Armijn Pane’s ideas as a window to the intellectual history of twentieth-century modern Indonesian culture. Why not then use Afrizal Malna’s life and work to write a microhistory of New Order Jakarta’s accelerated modernization? Among the poets of New Order Jakarta, he was one of the most attuned to the sort of modern life to which the city was
giving birth. He was also one of the favoured few to whose eyes late New Order Jakarta—in and through its forest of things (Malna 2000:279, 2009:76)—had bared its soul, and whose oeuvre the city branded with its distinctive seal.

I offer this essay as an unorthodox contribution to the historiography of New Order Jakarta. Privileging the macro- and meso-structural approaches, historians and historically minded social scientists have taught us much about the forces shaping Soeharto’s Jakarta, such as cultural diversity and the conflict between the state and the urban poor (Abeyasekere 1987:215–53), the structural and cultural production of poverty (Jellinek 1995), urban-planning politics (Silver 2008:111–212), and violence and insecurity (Tadié 2009). But little interest has been shown in exploiting the potential of microhistory for understanding the experiential dimension of New Order Jakarta’s capitalist transformation. To fill part of the gap, this essay examines Afrizal Malna’s life and writings to evoke and illuminate Jakarta’s encounter with Third World modernity.

To highlight—as the microhistorian should (Robisheaux 2017:3)—the inter-fusion of New Order Jakarta’s structural forces and the city dweller’s agency, this essay brings into dialogue two often divergent approaches to the study of urbanism. Below I present a social-science telescopic view of the city’s industrial transformation, while in the remainder of the article I place New Order Jakarta under the microscope: specimens (that is, Afrizal’s life and writings) of the city’s ‘biocultural body’ are scrutinized for insights into the impact of modernization.

2 Jakarta’s Transformation (1966–1998)

Over the course of the New Order, Indonesia rapidly industrialized. As a share of GDP, manufacturing grew from 8.4% in 1960 to 21.3% in 1991, with agriculture dwindling from 53.9% to 19.5% (Robison 1996:79). In Jakarta, the country’s centre of industrialization, manufacturing’s contribution to employment expanded from 14.9% in 1980 to 20.6% in 1990 (Jones and Mamas 1996:58). In 1985–1995, the city’s labour force in manufacturing increased by 45.3% (Forbes 2004:277).

Foreign direct investment (FDI) and oil earnings provided much fuel for New Order economic development. From 1967 to 1982, 58% of the FDI flowed primarily into the oil and gas sectors, while 11% went into manufacturing. Indonesia enjoyed oil windfalls in 1973–1974 and in 1979–1980. From 1971 to 1981, the economy grew at a yearly average rate of 7.7% (H. Hill 2000:36; Lindblad 2015:221; Thee 2012:90). But the fall of world oil prices in 1982 abruptly shifted Indonesia’s economy, ending a decade of high growth and abundance and ush-
ering in several years of slowdown and rising foreign debts. Later, from 1986 to mid 1997, the economy regained momentum (H. Hill 2000:16), only to crash in early 1998, bringing down Soeharto’s regime along with it.

High economic growth expanded the middle classes. These included, among others, office clerks, civil servants, intellectuals, artists, farmers of medium-sized farms, professionals, middle-ranking military officers, and small and medium entrepreneurs. In 1980, middle-class Indonesians numbered 5 million (Mackie 1990:100). In Jakarta alone, in 1971–1990, as proportion of its population, the number of professionals and managers grew from 6% to 8% (Robison 1996:84).

Given the economy’s rapid ups and downs, however, the struggling segment of Jakarta’s kampung middle class experienced life as a roller coaster ride (Jelinek 1995:44). Poverty lurked around every corner. Over the last 18 years of the New Order, the poor’s share of the country’s population fluctuated: declining in 1980–1996 but rising again in 1998 (Tambunan and Purwoko 2002:25).

Life was difficult for many Jakartans. During 1968–1974, the price of medium-quality rice increased at a rate of 17% per annum (Glassburner 1978:145). In the mid 1980s, less than a quarter of the population had access to tap water (United Nations 1989:30). By the early 1990s, in the Greater Jakarta Region, 70% of all the inhabitants could not afford to buy their own home (Cowherd 2002:174). In 1990, only 8.7% of Jakarta’s employed population received university-level education (Jones and Mamas 1996:68).

Landscape change, the proliferation of consumer goods, and the growth of the media industry were among the symptoms of the rise of capitalism in New Order Jakarta. From 1980 to 2000, much FDI went into the construction of new toll roads, business towers, shopping malls, golf courses, and suburban housing complexes (Cowherd 2002:25, 62). Office space expanded from 0.1 million in 1978 to 2.7 million square metres in 1997 (Firman 1999:453). The number of apartment blocks increased from five in the late 1980s to 20 in 1997. By 1995, 25 shopping malls dotted the city’s landscape (Firman 1999:457), stimulating retail growth and promoting consumer culture lifestyles.

In New Order Jakarta, the world of things experienced a growth spurt. During 1990–1996, while contributing only a quarter of Indonesia’s exports, Jakarta consumed more than half the country’s imports (Firman 1998:236). The city found itself awash with consumer goods. Of these, motor vehicles were among the most noticeable and mobile. During 1976–1998, cars rose in number from 100,000 to 952,264, motorcycles from 314,000 to 1,527,906, and buses from 1,450 to 253,718 (Rimmer 1986:61–3; Kantor Statistik Jakarta 2002:345). In rush hours, the streets teemed and vibrated with swarms of motor vehicles whirring and honking.
Due to prolonged everyday intercourse, the city’s motorists and motorcyclists transformed—and were transformed by—their cars and motorbikes. Just as the city’s motor vehicles were developing ‘animalistic’ properties (Bodden 2010:136), the commuters were exhibiting machine-like qualities. During flâneries by car and on motorcycle in the streets, and while working in the office or factory, Jakarta’s workers and urban nomads morphed, albeit temporarily, into human-machine assemblages or real-life incarnations of the mechanized human beings from Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern times* (1936). The phenomenon prefigured the mutual structuring between many of today’s Jakartans and their smartwatches, mobile phones, tablets, and laptops. New Order Jakarta’s human-machine interaction, as well as the underlying ‘material unconscious’, is something whose corporeal history has yet to be written.

Industrialization, immigration, and population fertility intensified the struggle for space among humans and between humanity and things in New Order Jakarta. Over the period 1961–1990, the city’s human population grew denser, rising from 5,039 to 12,439 people per square km (Biro Pusat Statistik 1982:59; Rahtz and Sidik 2005:237). Day-to-day interaction between humans and things generated enough alchemic fire for the city to keep its cultural cauldron bubbling and gurgling—brewing up new forms of bodily experiences and textual and visual images. Several phenomena provide evidence of this development: during the New Order, televised *wayang* (shadow puppet) performances produced a disembodied reception of the genre (Mrázek 2002); images of consumer goods invaded popular fiction (Esha 1978); and the techniques of collage and montage spilled over from TV commercials and music video clips into poetry (Malna 1990, 1995).

The communion of things, images, and the human body derived much of its energy from, and expressed itself in, Jakarta’s fast-growing mediascape. By 1980, radio or cassette players—still a rarity in the late 1960s—had made their way into the homes of 64.4% of the city’s population (Steer 1984:36). Between 1966 and 1987, the number of TV sets jumped from 47,438 to 1.1 million (Oliver 1971:18; United Nations 1995:467). Daily newspaper circulation climbed from 900,000 in 1977 to 1.2 million in 1987 (M. Anderson 1984:138; United Nations 1995:467). By 1996, Jakarta had 71.6% of the country’s total print media circulation (Sen and Hill 2007:66).

An advertising boom shook Indonesia’s media landscape. In 1983–1995, advertising expenditures soared from Rp 76 billion to Rp 3,335 billion (Setiyono 2004:64; Thomas 1998:231), the bulk of which went into the coffers of Jakarta’s media establishments. While objects were filling up the city, the advertising industry blew up the city dweller’s visual world, assailing it with a storm of potent images that magnified the appeal of commodities.
So alarmed was President Soeharto by this development that on 1 April 1981 he banned television advertising. He and his advisers feared a scenario where TV commercials would raise people’s consumerist aspirations too far beyond their means, fuelling explosive frustration and sparking riots (Pusat Data dan Analisa Tempo 2019:12–23). This was despite the fact that the president’s advisers had anticipated that modernizing Indonesia’s economy would entail—and even encourage—the mass pursuit and enjoyment of objects of consumer culture (Moertopo 1973:34). In trying to curb the onslaught of consumer goods and their media images, Soeharto was going against one main current in the history of the country since the 1930s: the centrality of consumer lifestyles in the acquisition, maintenance, and display of modernity (Schulte Nordholt 2011).

Indonesian literati relied heavily, for survival and development, on the popular print media. The substantial growth of earnings from circulation and advertising made it possible for Jakarta’s newspapers and magazines to support weekly cultural sections, which provided Indonesian writers with a mass outlet for their poems, fiction, essays, and book reviews. Unlike the huge readership of the highly popular sections serving crime, sport, and human-interest stories, the ‘fanbase’ of the weekly cultural sections remained small. Its core included the writers, readers, editors, and critics of ‘serious’ literature. Together, they played a vital role in the development of Indonesian literature.

Throughout the New Order, rapid industrialization, high-growth economy, vigorous advertising campaigns, and an emergent consumer culture created a new Jakarta where humans, things, and images intermingled, forging a prolific symbiosis that articulated itself in a plethora of urban phenomena. Among these, one of the most revelatory was the intertwining of Afrizal Malna’s life, habitat, poetry, and short fiction in 1979–1999. The following section sketches out his life under Guided Democracy and in the New Order, placing it primarily in the changing world of Senen, his home district in Central Jakarta.

3 A Boy from Kramat

For much of the second half of the twentieth century, occupying an area of about 4.22 square km at the heart of Jakarta, the cosmopolitan, volatile, and crowded district of Senen was one of the capital’s hubs of commerce, public transport, popular culture, and social ills.

---

2 For instance, in 1996, literature enthusiasts constituted 3% of the entire readership of the daily *Sinar Harapan* (Yudiono 2010:220).
One theme in Senen’s rapid transformation during the New Order was the emergence of a modernity at once incomplete and disruptive. Between 1966 and 1998, Senen’s landscape changed considerably with the construction of the multi-storey Proyek Senen shopping centre (1966–1977), the Taman Ria Senen amusement park on its rooftop (1969), the Planet Senen youth centre (1973–1974), the Senen bus terminal (1980), and the Plaza Atrium superblock (1992). Made possible, in most cases, by the demolition of pre-existing slums and the eviction of thousands of their underclass inhabitants, these beacons of New Order modernity remained haunted by the spectres it aimed to exorcise: crowding, traffic congestion, and poor waste management; fires and flooding; poverty, prostitution, and crimes; arson, riots, and police and military corruption; domestic violence, neighbourhood brawls, school-boy street fights, and inter-ethnic gang warfare (Tadié 2003:410).

During the New Order, what struck Afrizal as Senen’s ‘Frankensteinian’ mutation sprang from the modus vivendi of two forces, sometimes antagonistic, sometimes mutualistic. On one side, there was the modernization offensive by an elite of generals, bureaucrats, technocrats, and construction capitalists bent on turning Jakarta into a world-class city (Malna 2009:71). On the other side, in defiance of and in collaboration with these ‘sorcerers of modernity’, stood a motley crew of non-elite actors, half-traditional, half-modern, with their everyday struggle for money, sex, power, prestige, and respect. Some were the denizens of Senen’s conventional society, including kampung dwellers, shopkeepers, restaurant owners, railway station officials, soldiers, police officers, dangdut musicians, journalists, street traders, pedicab drivers, market coolies, and industrial workers. Others were the figures of Senen’s underworld, such as pickpockets, snatchers, muggers, fences, gangsters, drug pushers, gamblers, prostitutes, pimps, tramps, and scavengers (Malna 2009:71).

In the second half of the twentieth century, many of Senen’s inhabitants, or at least their parents and grandparents, started out as immigrants. They came from Indonesia’s various ethnic groups: Batak, Chinese, Javanese, Madurese, Makassarese, Minangkabau, Moluccans, Palembangese, and Sundanese. To survive, they quickly adopted to the city’s way of doing things. Many of their Jakarta-born offspring were to see themselves as native Jakartans (Abeyasekere 1987:192). Massive immigration made Senen, for quite some time, one of Jakarta’s most crowded districts (Institute of Economic and Social Research 1956:248; Kantor Statistik Jakarta 1994:48).

---

It was into this shape-shifting, conflict-ridden, and sometimes explosive Senen that Afrizal Malna was born on 7 June 1957. His father and mother, Malin Sutan Bagindo and Nurjana, were Minangkabau immigrants from Bukittinggi, West Sumatra. They had left their home town for Jakarta not long before the 1958 outbreak of the PRRI rebellion in West Sumatra against the central government. In the capital city, Malin supported the family working as a shareholding cook in a Minangkabau restaurant. During the first twenty-five years of his life, Afrizal seems to have lived in his parents’ home to the south of the Senen railway station, at Jalan Tongkang 45 in Kramat, one of the wards in the Central Jakarta district of Senen.

Afrizal’s parents were part of the wave of migrants who, between the late 1940s and the early 1950s, flooded into Jakarta seeking better life chances (Institute of Economic and Social Research 1956:242; Nikmah 2018:45). The size of Jakarta’s Minangkabau community increased from 2,937 in 1930 to 60,100 in 1961, and to 264,639 in 2000. As a share of the city’s population, over this period it grew from 0.9 to 2.1 and to 3.18% respectively (Departement van Landbouw, Nijverheid en Handel 1933:167; Castles 1967a:85; Suryadinata, Arifin and Ananta 2003:54). The ‘Jakartanization’ that Afrizal experienced growing up was so thoroughgoing that he lost touch with his ethnic roots.

Stultified by Guided Democracy’s ideological warfare, then sugar-coated and made mercurial and alienating by the New Order’s standardization, sanitization, and industrialization (Bodden 2010:140, 146–8), Indonesian was almost the only language spoken in Afrizal’s home. As such, it was the language he ended up thinking in. Minangkabau was used, if at all, only by his parents when talking to each other.

---

the family had in the way of a tangible indicator of its ethnic cultural identity (Mawardi 2007). De-traditionalization and Jakarta’s defective modernization engendered in Afrizal a sense of being a cultural ‘orphan’ or ‘alien’.\(^\text{10}\) This biographical factor contributed to the tenor of his poetry.

Between the mid 1960s and the late 1970s, there were, in Senen, things and events that played a significant role in the genesis of Afrizal’s fundamental ideas about urbanism in New Order Jakarta. Sending shock waves across the district now and then, riots, arson, and forced evictions highlighted the centrality of violence to the New Order’s statecraft and city-making (Abeyasekere 1987:240; Malna 2009:70–1; Malna 2013).\(^\text{11}\) Periodic fires, interethnic armed brawls, and domestic abuse punctuated everyday life in Kramat, exposing the violence that helped forge the social world of Jakarta.\(^\text{12}\) Though Malin Sutan Bagindo and Nurjana rarely used physical punishment to discipline their children, they inadvertently stifled the young boy Afrizal’s nascent critical mind. When he asked questions about Islam—such as why, during the hajj, Muslim pilgrims kiss the Black Stone in the Kaaba at the Grand Mosque of Mecca—they hushed him up.\(^\text{13}\) The dark side of life in Senen—from which, as part of his defence mechanism, he ‘morally sealed himself off’ (Malna 2009:69)—helped give rise to his pessimism over the domestic sphere in the Third World metropolis. In his mature years, Afrizal would view the nuclear family as an ‘unproductive’, harmful institution and Jakarta as an ‘anxiety-inducing machine of change’.\(^\text{14}\)

Still, during Guided Democracy and the New Order, Afrizal’s experience of Jakarta was anything but monolithic. On occasions, the city was generous enough to bestow its baffling gifts on him. The young boy Afrizal found some of these within the bounds of the Senen district. On Jalan Kramat Raya, at the Sundanese Miss Tjitjih and the Javanese Wayang Orang Adiluhung folk

---


theatres, he saw plays showcasing the power of drama as conjurer of alternate realities (Malna 2009:70; Nikmah 2018:45–7). At moments of dark epiphany, Senen revealed to him its perversely beautiful. One night, just before dawn, along the railroad tracks between Kramat and Tanah Tinggi, he encountered that beauty in the form of the rag pickers’ shacks with their flickering oil lamps (Malna 2009:69). When times got rough, he found in his home in Kramat things that helped him to keep going: a toy war-chariot, his older brother’s comic books, and the children’s magazine *Kuntjung.*

Growing up, Afrizal discovered in the world beyond Senen more resources to ease the burden of urban life. During 1971–1976, as a student of Junior High School 6 (then on Jalan Cikini Raya in the upmarket Menteng neighbourhood) and Senior High School 5 (then on Jalan Budi Utomo), he discovered new ways to get out of his head. Sometimes, all it took for him to ‘feel intensely alive’ was the rock and roll music blaring from his cassette player, or the body-shaking vibration from the engine of the city bus he was riding on (Malna 2009:72). Almost every weekend in 1974–1978, the young, romantic Afrizal would climb Mount Gede or Pangrango, south-east of Bogor, West Java, trying to cleanse himself of the impurities of urban civilization. But it was within the bounds of Jakarta that he found more rewarding means of urban transcendence. These included exchanges of poetic messages with friends on the radio, painting classes at the nearby Planet Senen youth centre, high school’s wall-magazine and theatre projects, and discussions at Taman Ismail Marzuki, an arts centre at Cikini, which the city government established in 1968 for Jakarta’s writers and artists to produce ‘art-for-art’, anti-communist versions of modern Indonesian culture (D. Hill 1993:245–6).

---


In early 1976, Afrizal acted in the staging of Putu Wijaya’s 1974 play Anu (Thingamajig) for the Senior High School 5’s inauguration night, an event that constituted a turning point in his life. Even as it subjected the actors and audience to verbal bombardments, the play, directed by Boyke Roring (1946–2013), highlighted the materiality of urban everyday life, using, as stage props, sheets of scrap zinc, all kinds of rubbish, and clotheslines—with bras and used clothes hanging on them—stretching out from the stage all the way into the audience (Malna 2017:xiii). Besides giving Afrizal a catharsis from the frustrations of big-city life, the play seems to have sparked in him an epiphany of Jakarta’s other, enigmatic faces. Along with the freedom of speech that he enjoyed in the public discussions at Taman Ismail Marzuki’s Arena Theatre, the high-school play opened up vistas to him, activating in him centrifugal modes of urban consciousness, which teleported him into another Jakarta—one that offered alternative spaces, encounters, and conversations. With the bloody destruction of communism in 1965–1966 and the subsequent suppression of political Islam, these were among the intellectual resources available for Jakartans of Afrizal’s generation to cope with the city’s barbarism and defend themselves against the New Order’s hypocritical paternalism, political repression, and destabilizing modernization (Malna 2017:xiii). It is worth highlighting that besides earning Afrizal’s drama troupe a finalist position in Jakarta’s Youth Theatre Festival, the 1976 high-school play helped him discover literature as his vocation.

4 A Writer of Urban Life

It would be another ten years before Afrizal jumped off into a full-time career as a littérateur. After completing high school in late 1976, he spent the next decade supporting himself in Jakarta as an office worker in three different industries: construction, maritime shipping, and life insurance (Bodden 2010:344). In his spare time, he trained to be a writer. In 1981–1983, he broadened his mind by attending the Jesuit-run Driyarkara Advanced School of Philosophy. This episode of his life was a mixed experience. Besides increasing his exposure to existentialism—whose impact is evident in his worldview, his modus operandi as a writer, and the ways he staged the dramatic readings of his poetry—

---


21 For Afrizal’s acknowledgement of existentialism’s role in his creative process as a poet, see Malna 2009:58. See also ’Proses menuju bentuk baru’, Fokus, 12-4-1984.
(Malna 2009:58; Surachman 1984)—the philosophical studies taught him to boldly re-examine things he thought he knew.\textsuperscript{22} Yet the straitjacket of scheduled exams and a standardized reading programme smothered the existentialist in him. It exacerbated his pre-existing discontent over the regimentation of language, thought, and political life in New Order Jakarta. After three years, he quit his studies.\textsuperscript{23}

From the late 1970s onwards, undertaking the practical component of his self-training as a wordsmith, Afrizal wrote and read feverishly. Even as he produced short stories, poems, essays, and plays, he mined the oeuvres of Indonesia’s modern literary masters for good ideas and techniques, which he could appropriate and adapt for his own purposes. In prose, he studied the realism of Nh. Dini (1936–2018), the existentialism of Iwan Simatupang (1928–1970), and the surrealism of Putu Wijaya (b. 1944) and Danarto (1941–2018). In poetry, he ransacked the works of Chairil Anwar, Amir Hamzah (1911–1946), Sutardji Calzoum Bachri (b. 1941), Sapardi Djoko Damono (1940–2020), Abdul Hadi W.M. (b. 1946), and Yudhistira Massardi (Malna 2009:72).

Of great import for Afrizal’s self-education in drama was his collaboration with Boedi S. Otong (b. 1957), director of the Jakarta-based troupe Teater Sae. Sometime in 1983, at the Gelanggang Remaja Jakarta Selatan (South Jakarta Youth Centre) on Jalan Bulungan in Kebayoran Baru, Afrizal met Boedi, with whom he quickly formed a friendship that grew into a long-lasting collaboration. The ensuing Boedi–Afrizal creative partnership was one of the most productive in both men’s careers (Bodden 2010:133–67).

For all their shortcomings, the Bulungan Youth Centre, the Taman Ismail Marzuki, and the Balai Budaya (Hall of Culture) deserve some credit. Part of the cultural ‘furniture’ that made Jakarta liveable, they provided the venues for the sorts of encounters and collaborations that aided the development of inner-city kampung youngsters like Afrizal into prominent writers. Such a metamorphosis was among the cultural manifestations of New Order Indonesia’s rising middle classes.

At the heart of Afrizal’s making as a writer was his struggle with monolingualism and a life without the moorings of a nurturing ethnic tradition.\textsuperscript{24} The

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
struggle arose from the fact that as a child of immigrants in Jakarta, he grew up in an almost exclusively Indonesian-speaking environment, and that he received his primary and secondary education in underfunded, poorly managed public schools. Afrizal left high school in 1976 without proficiency in Minangkabau nor in any of the world's major languages. This was a handicap. Knowledge of the Minangkabau language and, say, English or Arabic would have allowed him to draw directly and with ease on his ancestral tradition and on the masterpieces of world literature. Reaching a dead-end, he would, as we shall see, fall back on his thing-centred, bodily experience, deploying it as dynamite to blast through linguistic and cultural barricades.


By 1984, Afrizal's oeuvre had made his presence felt in Jakarta's and Indonesia's literary scene. Based on his script, Teater Sae's 1983 production of Teater hitam konstruksi keterasingan (Black theatre: Construction of alienation) captured the attention of Jakarta's leading 'men of culture', such as critic H.B. Jassin (1917–2000), choreographer Sardono W. Kusumo (b. 1945), and actor-cum-director Ikranagara (b. 1943) (Bodden 2010:137–8). The best of Afrizal's early poems exhibited the same literary prowess that shone through in his scripts for Teater Sae. In 1983, Sapardi and Sutardji saw him as moving along ‘a very promising [poetic] track’. In 1984, several of his mystical poems—such as 'Jalan burung' (Bird’s path), ‘Pelabuhan pulau terasing' (Coastal port on a remote island), and ‘Pelayaran Tuhan' (Voyage to God)—earned the praise of the Sufi poet Abdul Hadi W.M. (Hadi 1984). That same year, with his first book of poetry Abad yang berlari (The onrushing century), he won the Hadiah Buku Sastra Dewan Kesenian Jakarta (Jakarta Arts Council Literary Book Award), which made him, at age 26, one of the promising literary writers of his generation (Malna 1995:97). Soon, however, Afrizal saw Abad yang berlari as yet another recycling of those literary traditions (whether ethnic, religious, or national) which he could not call his own.26

Afrizal made up his mind to strike out in a new direction. It was precisely by turning his cultural liability into a writerly asset that he managed to find his own distinctive poetic voice. First, he purged himself of the styles that he had borrowed from Indonesian poetry’s father-figures (Malna 1983a). This was his existential and Oedipal way of rebooting his writing life. Then, inspired by his theatrical collaboration with Boedi S. Otong, Afrizal changed his poetry and fiction by changing his working habit: he returned to his own body, living and breathing, in symbiosis with Jakarta’s empire of things. He paid close attention to his body’s everyday intercourse with the material world, trying to fully experience, and be mindfully present in, the daily chores he did at home, such as washing clothes, sweeping the floor, or pounding away, alone and naked, at his typewriter. By forcing him to jettison his knowledge of Indonesian literature and start ‘writing from the body’, Afrizal’s writerly ‘yoga’ entrenched him firmly in the city of his birth, which he had long tried to psychically escape. Over the last decade of the New Order, having re-occupied his body, Jakarta used it as a ‘stove’ to cook up poems and tales that assaulted the reader with a mass of images from the material world: body lotion, margarine, and barbiturates; shoes, lipsticks, and sunglasses; phones, TVs, and refrigerators; petrol, cars, and tractor-trailers; neon signs, electricity poles, and Xeroxes.

The fruit of this quest was what I will call ‘literature from things and the body’, to which Afrizal owed the discovery of his own voice. During the second half of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, he expressed this signature voice with verve and brilliance. Afrizal’s bodily and material poetics made its debut in 1985 with the booklet of poems Mitos-mitos kecemasan (Anxiety myths) and began to take definite shape in the 1990 anthology Yang berdiam dalam mikropon (That which dwells in microphones). But it was in the 1995 book of verse Arsitektur hujan (Architecture of rain) that Afrizal’s body-based, object-centred poetry reached its brilliant climax, shaking up several sectors of Indonesia’s literary scene, and securing his reputation as one of the most original of the late New Order poets. By 1999, with the publishing of the collection Kalung dari...

---


teman (Necklace from a friend), the high fever of Afrizal’s bodily and material poetry had run its course. As a literary defence mechanism against the shock of Soeharto’s authoritarian modernization, it lost its raison d’être with the collapse of the New Order.

5 The City, the Body, and Things in the ‘Onrushing Century’

Even prior to Afrizal’s ‘poetic rebirth’ in the late 1980s, the embryo of bodily materialism had already appeared in some of his poetry and short fiction of 1979–1984. A selection of Afrizal’s writings offers glimpses of industrialization’s impact on, and reaction from, the human body and its sensorium during that period. The works include the poem ‘Orang-orang punya tombak’ (Spearmen [Malna 1980a:202]); the three short stories ‘Juga tak kutemui di atas puncak’ (Not to be found at the mountain’s peak [Malna 1979:69–71]), ‘Setitik air mata telah sampai lebih dahulu ke tempatnya’ (The teardrop has reached its destination earlier [Malna 1980b:164–5]), and ‘Konstruksi keterasingan’ (Alienating construction [Malna 1982:365–7]); as well as several poems from Abad yang berlari (Malna 2019 [1984]:7, 10–11, 13–4).

This constellation of writings was as much a product of the times as it was a literary crystallization of Afrizal’s experience of living in, reading about, and reflectively observing the Jakarta of the late 1970s to the mid 1980s. The period had a macabre, roller-coaster quality to it, seeing as it did a euphoric surge of world oil prices in 1978–1979, their shocking collapse in 1982, a resulting recession, the extrajudicial killings in 1982–1985 of around 5,000 alleged criminals, and the September 1984 Tanjung Priok riot that left several hundred people dead. Through a composite reading of ‘Orang-orang punya tombak’, ‘Juga tak kutemui di atas puncak’, ‘Setitik air mata telah sampai lebih dahulu ke tempatnya’, ‘Konstruksi keterasingan’, and Abad yang berlari, we can reconstruct Afrizal’s critique of Indonesia’s modernization, a critique that centres on how the city dweller, as an embodied being, sought to come to grips with life inside an empire of industrial things.

The 1982 short story ‘Konstruksi keterasingan’ argues that the New Order’s race for progress was damaging the city dweller’s life (Malna 1982:365–7). In protest against the dehumanizing aspects of modernity, the story’s anguished narrator dismisses the idea of progress as a non-issue. ‘Why on earth’, he rhetorically asks, ‘should people progress?’ Believing that becoming human is what really matters, he goes on to expose modernization as nothing more than a ‘progress disease’: a ‘morbid pursuit of goals’, ‘hopes’, and ‘power’ bound to turn the city into a living nightmare (Malna 1982:365).
The narrator of ‘Konstruksi keterasingan’ finally finds himself lost in a dystopian urban empire of things created by Soeharto’s modernization programme. It is a ‘bombastic dream world’ of ‘grids and boxes’ (Malna 1982:366) where ‘an [incomprehensible] force’—a ‘madness’, really—has seized the narrator, ‘taking possession of [his] senses’ (Malna 1982:366). Like real-life Jakarta in the early 1980s, the fictional city in ‘Konstruksi keterasingan’ offers a vast variety of goods and services: cars, trains, phones, wailing sirens, maps, flags, bank accounts, hotels, parties, and bottles of whiskey (Malna 1982:365, 367). Bursting at the seams with all sorts of commodities, and apparently self-replicating like viruses, the modernizing city in the story is a world in constant flux where—as Tim Ingold (2014:216) puts it—things are so much alive they keep ‘leaking’ and ‘discharging’: they infiltrate not just one another but also the human body.

The poem ‘Orang-orang punya tombak’ and the story ‘Konstruksi keterasingan’ suggest that the sensitive members of New Order Jakarta’s population might have developed a claustrophobic response to infestation and infection by the material world. The speaker in ‘Orang-orang punya tombak’ tells us: ‘Cities are running towards me / demanding a place to occupy / demanding a world’ (Malna 1980a:202). Separately, but in a similar vein, the narrator of ‘Konstruksi keterasingan’ worries lest the city’s hotels may have wormed their way into his body and invaded all his blood cells (Malna 1982:365). Desperate to cure himself of the infection, the speaker in ‘Orang-orang punya tombak’ contemplates suicide: ‘[L]et me spear these cities that occupy my head’ (Malna 1980a:202). Afrizal has so far identified two other remedies short of suicide: one is intoxication (Malna 1983b:214); the other, which he himself still practises to this day, is literature.

In the story ‘Konstruksi keterasingan’, the narrator’s ‘phobia’ for industrial objects is only matched by his hunger for the companionship of fellow human beings (Malna 1982:367). Industrialization gone awry has stripped Jakartans of their humanity and made the city too volatile for them to form happy, long-term relationships. As the narrator in the story ‘Setitik air mata telah sampai lebih dahulu ke tempatnya’ hyperbolically says: ‘There’s no one I know anymore [here]. All my relatives are dead. [...] And so is society’ (Malna 1980b:165). Searching for contact with the now-endangered homo sapiens, the narrator of ‘Konstruksi keterasingan’ wanders from city to city, calling out now and again: ‘Hey cities! will you please give me human beings?’ ‘Hey hotels! Why don’t you give me people?’ (Malna 1982:365).

How, during 1979–1984, did New Order modernization transform Jakarta into what seemed to Afrizal a dystopian city? The answer—as the 1984 anthology Abad yang berlari makes clear—is acceleration. The volume’s overall claim...
is that by the early 1980s, industrialization had raised the tempo of life in Jakarta up to infernal heights, generating a ‘Thanatic force’ (energi kematian) that held Jakartans captive inside ‘the onrushing century’. This argument plays out in four early manifestations of Afrizal’s ‘poetry from things and the body’. These poems include ‘Prosa hitam pasar orang-orang’ (Black prose of the human market [Malna 2019:13–4]), ‘Jalan-jalan berteriak’ (The streets scream [Malna 2019:10]), ‘Arsitektur hotel’ (Hotel architecture [Malna 2019:7]), and the eponymous piece ‘Abad yang berlari’ (The onrushing century [Malna 2019:11]).

The poem ‘Abad yang berlari’ is best read from the perspective of the city dweller’s body experiencing a Jakarta being forged by the New Order’s hammer of rapid industrialization during the 1970s construction boom. The poem merits quoting in full:

Hammer. Time won’t stop. Time
won’t stop. A thousand clocks tell different times, hammer,
each going its way.

People are watching TV, hammer,
watching death on display in the streets. Seated
on benches, they have sung in schools and
in the marketplaces. They’re trying to remodel
Paradise. They’re Death’s children –
time has locked them up in solitude.

With their workshops, their seas of work, their machineries,
the cities keep coming and going, hammer,
sending all maps running helter-skelter, failing to catch up
with times. Death is at work in the streets, hammer.
Death is at work in the streets.
The dada that works in time.30

See Afrizal’s invitation to H.B. Jassin (22-03-1984), kept at the Pusat Dokumentasi Sastra H.B. Jassin (H.B. Jassin Literary Documentation Centre) to the dramatic reading of Abad yang berlari on 5 April 1984 at the Teater Tertutup (Enclosed Theatre), Taman Ismail Marzuki.

In his New Order poems, the word dada (literally ‘chest’) helped Afrizal represent and ‘lament over’ something ‘incomprehensible’ and dehumanizing: Soeharto’s ‘political culture of silencing’ and the ‘frequent clashes’ of ‘human development’ and economic modernization. In other cases, denoting as it does that body part which houses the heart and
The world goes on running, leaving behind a thousand people gasping for breath.\footnote{Malna 2019:11. For the original Indonesian, see the Appendix. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Afrizal Malna’s poetry and fiction in this essay are mine.}

At a literal level, the word hammer ($\textit{palu}$), occurring seven times in the poem, conjures the image of the hammer of pile drivers whose pounding and clanking took over Jakarta’s soundscape, redefining its rhythm, shaking the city dweller’s body, making the earth tremble beneath his feet. At an interpretive level, ‘Abad yang berlari’ claims that New Order industrialization—through the manic banging of its figurative hammer in the city’s road networks, school system, business centres, and mediascape—forged into being a space-time chaos: by about 1984, economic development had so sped up Jakarta’s mutation that the city dweller’s brain had trouble mapping it and his body clocks struggled to stay apace with it.

The poem ‘Jalan-jalan berteriak’ further dramatizes the pressure inflicted on the city dweller’s body by Jakarta’s modernization, which Afrizal calls ‘dada’. At nights, once the disciplining and all-measuring clock of progress struck the ‘empty hour of dada’, the streets of Jakarta—where ‘everything leaked out’ (for streets are living processes rather than dead objects)—would scream ‘Dada!’ incessantly, twisting the city dweller’s neck, arms, and legs around towards the diabolic clock. After waking the multiverse of modernity from its sleep, Jakarta’s hysterical streets would force the poem’s speaker, one of the ‘broken people’ begotten by industrialization, to simultaneously inhabit those ‘thousands of worlds’. (The implication is that he has first to self-divide himself thousands of times, further exacerbating his fragmentation.) This depiction of modernity’s perverted sense of space-time finds echoes in Afrizal’s short stories ‘Konstruksi keterasingan’ and ‘Juga tak kutemui di atas puncak’. The former story has the narrator exclaim, ‘What the hell! The hands of my watch are spinning round so fast!’ (Malna 1982:367). In the latter story, the narrator reports: ‘The world feels like a merry-go-round that makes children dizzy and seasick’ (Malna 1979:69).

Taking us off the city streets and into the commodified privacy of what I will call Hotel Modernity, ‘Arsitektur hotel’ uses the allegory of the city as a hotel to expose the bourgeois sections of New Order Jakarta as nothing more than

\begin{quote}
\textit{the lungs, dada serves Afrizal as a code for ‘the [human] self’. Personal communication, Afrizal Malna, 2021.}
\end{quote}
an antihome. Even as the city’s factories and offices were increasingly mechanized and rationalized, its bourgeois homes were engineered—as a reading of the early 1980s issues of the women’s magazines *Femina* and *Kartini* will testify—for efficiency, hygiene, convenience, and style. To get an idea of what Afrizal then considered the impact of this dual process on the life of the bourgeois city dweller, take a look at what happens in Hotel Modernity. At work behind the scenes here are the invisible, nameless, but nonetheless powerful agents: New Order modernizers. Armed with science and technology (alchemic ‘stones’), these wizards of progress not only convert things, organic and non-organic, into all kinds of industrial objects (‘seats’, ‘doors’, ‘windows’, ‘cars’, ‘radio sets’, buildings) but also turn bourgeois Jakartans into ‘hotel guests’ (urban nomads as consumers). Rather than fill them with joy and vitality, the consumption of—and symbiosis with—commodities plunge them into loneliness and stupor: they ‘drive their cars alone, listen to the radio alone’. Like the poem’s hotel guests who ‘crack […] eggs from room to room’, New Order Jakarta’s bourgeois zombies killed the life in and around themselves. Having processed all aspects of life into commodities subject to the vagaries of market forces, capitalism had made it impossible for Jakarta’s bourgeois to honour any commitments (other than business ones) and to form social solidarity (except in defence of their class interests). Intellectually, they also had lost their bearings: all the highly specialized sciences (Hotel Modernity’s ‘shattered mirrors’) could give them were fragmentary views of themselves and the world. Overall, the poem suggests that, by 1984, New Order modernization had made bourgeois Jakarta hotel-like: prescribed, regimented, dead.

In ‘Prosa hitam pasar orang-orang’, Afrizal explores two modernist themes: the quantification of nature and the commodification of humanity. He scans the psychophysical damage done to the city dweller by the commercialization of city life into what he calls a ‘human market’. Here, with its ‘voices from the graves’, the modern mind calculates nature and humanity for their exchange value. Finding himself reduced to a commodity, the poem’s narrator tells us: ‘I dreamed / I became human.’ It so happens, however, that modernity’s ‘roaring weapons’, sent to ‘torture the trees, the earth, and the sky’, have arrived and occupy the streets, turning the city-as-dream-world into the city-as-nightmare. Meanwhile, nature, extensively commodified, invades the narrator’s body and explodes in it. The narrator survives the blast but becomes a monster: a blind, undead figure of modernity who—with ‘his chest

---

32 The poem’s Indonesian original is provided in the Appendix.
cut open, chock-full of stinking clods of earth’—‘moves about’ and mutters, ‘I’m becoming human.’ Then the monster sings ‘the gravedigger’s song’ for ‘all the lonely people’ forced under torture ‘to eat the [commodified] world lump by lump’.

The toxic but electrifying emotions endemic to Afrizal’s 1984 book of poetry Abad yang berlari were fuelled by his early vision of Jakarta as plagued by the maladies of New Order modernity, ranging from ennui, emptiness, emotional constipation, and identity crisis to anguish, alienation, and dehumanization. This dark vision drew its nourishment, in part, from Afrizal’s everyday routine during 1977–1986 as an office worker in Jakarta (Asy’ari 1985; Bodden 2010:136) and from his life growing up in the district of Senen.

Afrizal’s is not the only voice crying out in the wilderness of modernity. He has precursors and contemporary allies—in literature and beyond, domestic and foreign. His poetry collection Abad yang berlari can as easily resonate with Charlie Chaplin’s 1936 silent comedy Modern times as with Godfrey Reggio’s 1982 experimental film Koyaanisqatsi: Life out of balance. There is little to no likelihood that during the late 1970s to the early 1980s, Afrizal—while writing the pieces that would constitute Abad yang berlari—may have had any knowledge of Charles Baudelaire’s Les fleurs du mal (Flowers of evil) and Le spleen de Paris (Spleen of Paris), where the lyric poet of French modernity diagnoses the social ills brought on by industrialization and urbanization in the so-called ‘capital of the nineteenth century’. But it is hard to overlook the transhistorical, transnational chemistry displayed by this triad of poetry anthologies: the affinity is strong enough to trigger resonances in the brains of those reading them in constellation.

Read in an Indonesian context, Afrizal’s Abad yang berlari reveals itself—through its vocabulary, core imagery, and political stance—to be part of the contemporary climate of opinion among Jakarta’s populist artists and intellectuals critical of New Order modernization. Indeed, the mid 1980s had seen a continuing fight in the city’s intellectual arena between the champions and critics of the New Order’s ‘accelerated modernization’. In December 1981, adamantly that Indonesia’s economic structure should become predominantly industrial by the turn of the twenty-first century, Soeharto’s right-hand man, Ali Moertopo, insisted on further speeding up the ongoing industrialization (Moertopo 1982). Loyal critics of the New Order took issue with Moertopo’s econcentric and elitist strategy of rapid modernization. In August 1975, Ismid Hadad, editor-in-chief of the social-science journal Prisma, warned that by over-pursuing economic growth, the New Order reduced the poor to ‘demographic figures’ and ‘cogs in a gigantic machine called development’. The ‘machine’ produced ‘skyscrapers, factories, [and] smokestacks’, as well as ‘magni-
ficent highways, deafening jet planes, [and] splendid metropolises'. But these masked a problem: how much of Indonesia's population had benefited from development? (Hadad 1975:75).

By 1984, several of Afrizal's fellow poets had denounced the damage done to the poor, both rural and urban, by Soeharto's modernization. In the 1977 poem 'Sajak sebatang lisong' (Song for a cigar), W.S. Rendra claims that modernization had thrown the nation into 'a state of emergency' (*masa darurat*). In the 1982 'Rudi Jalak gugat' (Rudi Jalak accuses), a long poem that struck a responsive chord with Afrizal (Malna 1983:214–5), Yudhistira Massardi portrays the troubled lives of Jakarta's poor youth in an 'age gone mad' (*zaman yang slebor*). Rendra's state of emergency, Yudhistira's age gone mad, and Afrizal's onrushing century all belong to a family of shared tropes for New Order intellectuals to grapple with the shocks of rapid industrialization and urbanization. Rendra, Yudhistira, and Afrizal carry on the torch handed down to them by Synthema (pseudonym of Soemantri), whose 1924/1925 short story 'Roesaknja kehidoepan di kota besar' (The corrupted life of a big city) made him one of Indonesia's pioneer critics of modern urbanism. Rendra's, Yudhistira's, and Afrizal's critiques of New Order modernization remained insider's critiques, which stopped short of attacking the roots of the problem: authoritarian, pragmatic, breakneck capitalism.

6 The Rain of Modernity

Afrizal's bodily and material fiction and poetry grew to full maturity with the publication of the short story 'Menanam Karen di tengah hujan' (Planting Karen in the rain) in 1995 and the books of verse *Arsitektur hujan* and *Kalung dari teman* in, respectively, 1995 and 1999. Here, Afrizal still wrestles with the impact of rapid social change—a preoccupation that expresses itself in the rain-themed titles for the 1995 poetry collection and the 1995 short story. The choice of title suggests the influence of Chairil Anwar's 1943 poem 'Kawanku dan aku' (My friend and I). As an alternative to A.A. Johns' (1964:399) interpretation of the poem as one about 'the futility of any attempt at communication', I propose reading it as one of the symptoms of a traumatic exposure—in Japanese-occupied Jakarta—to World War II's destructive energies, which here took the form of an acid 'rain' that 'whipped' the city dweller's body, 'peeled' its 'strength away', and turned it into 'a skeleton', rendering all human endeavour meaningless. Of a similar mindset to Chairil, but operating in the different reality of late New Order Jakarta, Afrizal used the rain metaphor to capture the state of chaos and hurry in which Jakartans had found themselves since the
seventeenth century as a result of accelerating social change. The experience seemed to Afrizal akin to that of literal rain in Jakarta. When the rain begins to fall, the city suddenly changes: the crowd grinds to a halt; people disperse; they dash for shelter.\(^{33}\) So far the rain of Jakarta’s transformation had taken several forms: Dutch imperialism, Indonesia’s national revolution, and New Order modernization.

The trouble—as Afrizal argues in ‘Menanam Karen di tengah hujan’—was that modernity’s corrosive rain kept going, stripping Jakarta of any intelligible history and making it impossible for the city dweller to develop a sense of identity. Karen, the story’s protagonist, articulates the plight this way: ‘I’ve stolen and worn the clothes of a lot of other people because I want to be more than just reality’s shadows. […] A lot of bodies, including my own, have lost their biography. […] Now I know why people use deodorant: to conceal the stench of bodies without biography’ (Malna 1996:53–4).

On closer inspection, the Jakarta of the New Order in *Arsitektur hujan*, ‘Menanam Karen di tengah hujan’, and *Kalung dari teman* is not all doom and gloom. Granted, suffering from ‘anxiety myths’ (Malna 1995:49), the city behaves like a digestive system quivering between diarrhoea and constipation. Yet, it allows the world of things and the embodied city dweller to have moments of symbiosis and, as it were, mutual understanding. Readers of the 1987 poem ‘Warisan kita’\(^{34}\) (Our inheritance) hear the narrator address his symbiotic partners: ‘Speak again my stove, my dining plate, my cooking pot, my wok, my bucket, my drinking glass, my water pump, […] my gas lighter’ (Malna 1990:27). What is this, if not a spell for summoning the industrial objects out of the realm of the material unconscious and into the city dweller’s consciousness where those things can tell their ‘life stories’?

The tales the objects tell of their lives intermingle with the complex web of the city dwellers’ own biographies. We can distil this lesson from three kindred poems in *Arsitektur hujan*. ‘Made of tin, glass, and iron’, the eating utensils in the 1990 poem ‘Biografi di atas meja makan’ (Biography on the dining table) ‘disclose who you are’. Once ‘the dining table is set’, ‘the tablecloth, plates, and spoons’ become a keyhole through which the reader can peer into the diners’ biographies (Malna 1995:43). Commodities possess insider knowledge of the city dwellers’ lives because they are the co-builders of these lives. As the 1991 poem ‘Kisah cinta tak bersalah’ (Innocent love story) confides to us, it is ‘with


\(^{34}\) The Appendix includes the Indonesian original.
body lotion, styling foam, and [aphrodisiac] pills’ that ‘Father reassembles himself’ (Malna 1995:6). A reading of the 1985 poem ‘Gadis kita’ (Our girl) will show the protagonist, a flâneuse of New Order Jakarta, to be a fluid assemblage of a human being and all kinds of things—from soaps, perfumes, and lipsticks to radio sets, cars, beauty parlours, motels, and restaurants (Malna 1995:51).

Reading Arsitektur hujan and Kalung dari teman, we encounter some of those implicit moments when the consumption of consumer goods made New Order Jakartans feel some sense of solidarity, however fragile. Afrizal’s preface to Arsitektur hujan suggests that the artefacts that city dwellers wear on their bodies may impress on their minds the traces—or even the secret presence—of all those dear strangers who have been in contact with the objects (Malna 1995:vii–ix).

On a related note, the 1997 poem ‘Usaha menjadi ibu rumah tangga’ (Trying to become a housewife) tells the story of a man who, by swapping roles with his wife, learns how her identity and lifeworld are assembled and maintained by the intermingling of the human body and things. He spends a day doing his wife’s daily activities around the house with her usual nonhuman workmates: preparing dinner in the kitchen, sweeping the floor with a broom, making phone calls, watching soap operas on TV, and so on (Malna 1999:16). Appreciative symbiosis with the empire of things allows city dwellers the chance to attend to—and join in—those fluxes and flows which constitute their homes and city.

Motor vehicles were part of the stuff that New Order Jakartans’ carnal desires, literary imaginings, and social intercourse are made of. Consider the city’s microbuses known as mikrolet. They squeezed the urban nomads closer together, forcing them into chance encounters as shocking as they were sexually charged. The 1996 poem ‘Catatan menghadapi udara panas’ (A note on how to deal with heat) suggests that a ride on a mikrolet may bring the lower-middle-class gentleman into an encounter with an attractive stranger. This encounter in the mikrolet’s tiny, commodified, public space may elicit several possible responses in him. For example, if blessed with finesse, he can strike up a chat with the woman and see where it goes. If he is socially awkward, it is best for him to remain silent and composed so as not to come across as a sexual predator. But if he is a poet, he can transform the erotic shock experience into a poem, like Afrizal’s ‘Catatan menghadapi udara panas’, whose speaker reports:

In the mikrolet [...] a young girl pulls down her skirt to cover her thighs. [...] // I want to have fun on this steamy afternoon. Alas! I only have enough money for the ride home. You cross the street in a hurry. The bitter songs of Iwan Fals play in the mikrolet, making me feel as if I were...
those fine hairs on the girl’s thighs. Cones of ice cream, bottles of shampoo, chocolate bars, and car tyres, followed by pots of flowers, tables, and chairs leap out of her knees and form a configuration.

MALNA 1999:89

It is as if after Afrizal embraced the organism-artefact symbiosis, the world of things freely invaded his body and used it to throw up poems whose text-based virtual realities fill up with—and are ruled by—the bodily and material dance of everyday life. Evidence of this development includes the 1995 poem ‘Orang-orang jam 7 pagi’ (People at 7 a.m.), which I quote here in full.\(^\text{35}\)

The pantry and the house roof made a lot of noise last night. Remnants of fried noodles seem like the mess left behind by a suicide. The rat must have invited his buddies over, opened the fridge, and covered that slice of butter with filth from the open sewers. I never know their joys and sorrows. Oh boy! This sentence is so noisy! The toothbrush and the sound of water dripping in the bathroom open the morning door and windows.

Blankets are still casting their shadows on the city, along with chicken porridge, bread and butter, and a pot of boiling water on the stove. Sounds of footsteps moving away from the porch make themselves heard. The smell of soap and shampoo on wet hair fills the air. The noise at the dining table turns into exhaust fumes. Three kilometres ago, I took a crowded bus, walked through the corridors that stored the calves of your legs, and vanished behind the elevator. Alas! There’s no society anymore in the phone calls you take.

At 7 a.m. I deliver my body in crystals of vitamin C and in sheets of photocopies: Half a kilo of dried squid, please; a bottle of cooking oil; and some garlic. With traces of sleep still in her hair, a mother suddenly throws off her blanket and yells: ‘Who the hell organized the morning this way?’ The voice sounds like a newscaster banging her fist on the table.

MALNA 1995:25

This and other such poems in *Abad yang berlari*, *Arsitektur hujan* and *Kalung dari teman* are the poetic equivalent of cubist collage. This choice of form signals Afrizal’s rejection of the varieties of Indonesian championed by New Order

\(^{35}\) See the Appendix for the Indonesian original.
bureaucrats, generals, technocrats, and journalists. Afrizal viewed their forms of bahasa Indonesia as part of what went wrong in New Order culture. Rather than make whole the city life that monstrous modernization had fractured, Afrizal's bodily and material poetry magnifies the wounds, the fractures, the pains. By so doing, Abad yang berlari, Arsitektur hujan, and Kalung dari teman gave New Order Jakarta a fitting poetic form.

Afrizal's 'cubist' poems had two gifts for New Order Jakartans. The first was an 'elixir of vision' to revive their ability to see the city with childlike wonder, rather than with New Order orthodoxy. The poems were a hammer for them to break the New Order habits of seeing, interpreting, and expressing the urban experience. Made up of quotes from scattered sources, and of bits of broken scenes and overheard conversation from everyday life, and governed by a syntax that mimicked the visual habitus of newspapers and TV screens and the chaos of the metropolis, Afrizal's poetic collages suggested how counterhegemonic life-strategies could be fashioned and enacted.

To read Afrizal's poems in a distracted, tactile, and visual mode—that is, the way one would profitably 'experience' a cubist painting—is to unlock those poem's second gift: a virtual arena where the denizens of New Order Jakarta could train to handle—and even enjoy—the everyday shocks with which the city bombarded their minds and bodies.

Afrizal's New Order poetry documents his changing attitude towards how human beings and the urban jungle of things intermingle. He began by poetizing the world of things to ward off what he saw as infection by it, which he dreaded. As time passed by, confrontation gave way to symbiosis, no matter how tentative. This led him—more than any of his contemporaries—to corporalize, materialize, and urbanize New Order Indonesian poetry, creating pieces that plunge with abandon into, and comment intelligently on, the alchemic sea of everyday city life.

7 Conclusion

Employing the New Order fragments of Afrizal's life, poetry, and fiction as unwitting 'informants' about Soeharto's Jakarta, this exercise in microhistory has caught glimpses of the experience of Third World modernity as refracted through the particularities of that life and that body of work. Oscillating between economically speeding up and politically 'constipating' New Order Jakarta's social metabolism, Soeharto's modernization produced, in the city dweller's life, a mixed bag of experiences. Many were painful: ranging from shock, hyperstimulation, and disorientation to fragmentation, alienation, and
‘dehumanization’. But at least two experiences proved constructive: Afrizal’s own development into one of Indonesia’s leading writers and his invention of a maverick poetic language capable of pushing Indonesian poetry further and expressing the symbiosis of city dwellers (as embodied beings) and things (as living entities).

Microhistorical readings of Afrizal’s bodily and material poems and short stories about New Order Jakarta have the potential to open up new vistas on the city’s under-explored layers, dimensions, and forces, which its contemporaneous denizens—had they managed to form a broad-based, progressive social movement—could have tapped to make their city a place they could call home.

Apart from historically documenting New Order Jakarta’s Frankensteinian modernity, the poetry and short fiction that Afrizal Malna composed in 1979–1998 remain, I believe, a storehouse of inspiration for urban nomads—in the twentieth century and after, both in Indonesia and beyond—to fashion critical and creative ways of surviving in, and even playing with, their cities as volatile ecosystems made up of the dangerous but life-enhancing symbiosis of organisms and things.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and to Professor Seungwon Song of the Department of Malay-Indonesian Interpretation and Translation for supporting the research on which this article is based. I am indebted to Afrizal Malna who, in our WhatsApp conversations in October 2021, helped crack several “puzzles” in his New Order poetry and fiction. I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticisms of the original draft, and Dr Klarijn Anderson-Loven for the meticulous editing of the final manuscript.

References

Bibliography

reading of Afrizal Malna’s *Mitos-mitos kecemasan* at Taman Ismail Marzuki, 23 October 1985.]


Suryadinata, Leo, Evi Nurvidya Arifin and Aris Ananta (2003). Indonesia’s population: Ethnicity and religion in a changing political landscape. Singapore: ISEAS.


**Filmography**


Appendix

Abad yang berlari

palu. waktu tak mau berhenti, palu. waktu tak mau berhenti. seribu jam menunjuk waktu yang beda berbeda. semua berjalan sendiri-sendiri, palu.

orang-orang nonton televisi, palu. nonton kematian yang dibuka di jalan-jalan, telah bernyanyi bangku-bangku sekolah, telah bernyanyi di pasar-pasar, anak-anak kematian yang mau merubah sorga. manusia sunyi yang disimpan waktu.

palu. peta lari berlarian dari kota datang dari kota pergi, mengejar waktu, palu, dari tanah kerja dari laut kerja dari mesin kerja. kematian yang bekerja di jalan-jalan, palu. kematian yang bekerja di jalan-jalan.

dada yang bekerja di dalam waktu.

dunia berlari. dunia berlari seribu manusia dipacu tak habis mengejar.

1984

Arsitektur hotel


Ini jam hotel. Dada. Waktu sedang membuat sarang, membuat telur. Setelah semua janji dianggap tidak suci, angin itu jadi
hotel, semangka itu jadi hotel, sapi itu jadi hotel. Maka jendela-
jendela hotel, Dada, menunggu semua yang pergi, menunggu
semua yang lari, menunggu semua yang tak setuju.

Biarkan tamu-tamu datang. Dada. Memecahkan telur dari
kamar ke kamar. Memecahkan telur dari kamar ke kamar.

1984

*Warisan kita*

Bicara lagi pisauku, gergajiku, linggisku, kampakku, paluku, paculku,
pahatku, obengku, tangku, penyutut kayuku, guntingku, ani-aniku,
penumbuk padiku, talang airku.

Bicara lagi ladang-ladangku, empang ikanku, lumbung berasku,
gudangku, kambingku, sanggar burungku, kandang kerbauku,
kucing-kucing dan ayamku, gerobakku, sepedaku, bunga-bungaku.

Bicara lagi rumahku, genting kacaku, jendelaku, pagarku, meja
makanku, kursi tamu, lemariku, tempat tidurku, selimutku, baju
dinginku, sandal jepitku, alat-alat tulisku, kitab-kitabku.

Bicara lagi komporku, piring makanku, panci masakku, penggoreng-
anku,
emberku, pompa airku, gelas minumku, tembakauku,
pipa rokokku, geretan gasku.

Bicara lagi cerminku, lampu senterku, topiku, payungku. Bicara lagi
foto-foto keluargaku, suara nenekmoyangku, para kerabat dan
tetanggaku, seperti menyebut kisah-kisahmu, yang belajar membaca.

1989

*Orang-orang jam 7 pagi*

Lemari makan dan atap rumah, ribut sekali semalam. Sisa-sisa
mie goreng seperti serakan orang bunuh diri. Tikus mengundang
teman-temannya di situ, membuka lemari es, membayangi se-
lokan-selokan got pada irisan mentega. Tak pernah kutahu
kebahagiaan dan kesedihan mereka: Aduh! Ribut sekali kalimat seperti ini. Lalu sikat gigi, suara air kamar mandi, mulai membuka pintu dan jendela-jendela pagi.


Jam 7 pagi aku antar tubuhku dalam kristal-kristal vitamin C, lembar-lembar foto copy: Tolong cumi kering setengah kilo; minyak goreng satu botol; bawang putih. Dan tidur yang tersisa pada rambut seorang ibu, tiba-tiba melempar selimut: siapa yang telah menyusun pagi jadi seperti ini? Suaranya, seperti siaran berita yang menggebrak meja.

1995