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

L.G. Saraswati Putri
University of Indonesia
sarasdewi3630@gmail.com


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.