

Literature for the people

By Z. AFIF

Ariel Heryanto first began to make an impression on me after I read his *Ganasnya Bahasa, Ganasnya Kekuasaan* (Forceful Language, Forceful Authority) in *Kompas* 30 April 1985. There he argued the idea that the way a language develops and is shaped is very much dependent upon the dominant groups in a society, and in turn works to the benefit of these groups.

In *Sastra, Koran dan Sastra Koran* (Literature, Media and the Literature of the Media) which appeared in *Sinar Harapan* 12 January 1985, Ariel analysed recent Indonesian literature. He observed firstly that literature was an urban phenomenon (thus removed from the day-to-day lives of the wider Indonesian population); and secondly that it has been greatly helped by the media, particularly newspapers and magazines. He was critical of how works that have appeared in newspapers have been trivialised and looked down upon as 'pop' literature or merely 'entertainment' for the masses.

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Contextual literature

More recently, in keeping with the *Sastra Kontekstual* debate, (see Inside Indonesia, No. 8), I have had occasion to read Ariel's *Sastra dan Politik* (Literature and Politics, RIMA, Summer 1984) in which Ariel again tackles the problem of recent Indonesian literature and his controversial 'contextual' literature concept – literature as a product of its environment. This concept of 'contextual' literature is contrasted with the concept of a 'universal' literature which, according to Ariel, is derived from spiritual and more esoteric sources. This 'contextual-universal' dichotomy has indeed received a great deal of attention. Arief Budiman's *Men-cari Sastra Yang Berpijak di Bumi: Sastra Kontekstual* (In Search of a Literature with its Feet on the Ground: Contextual Literature) caused vocal reaction from such proponents of the 'universal' concept as Abdul Hadi WM and Sutardji Calzoum Bachri.

Poems

In 1979, in the now defunct *Seni Budaya* column of *Sinar Harapan*, I came across the poems of Ariel Heryanto. Although

this was my first encounter with this writer and his works, I was immediately captivated by the force of the poems. Indeed, the opinions he has expressed in his *Sastra Kontekstual* essays are reflected in the tone of his poems.

The first poem *Dialog Larut Malam* (Late Night Dialogue) describes the negative impact of technological developments that have been adopted without forethought, resulting in the loss or damage of aspects of the environment that should rightly have been protected and preserved. The 'dialogue' takes the form of an old man relating to his grandchild – amidst coughing fits – stories of 'the way things were' in the days before technological advancement and monopoly capitalism robbed people of their tranquillity. The poem is an expression of the frustration of a society where happiness and inner peace are constantly threatened; where one can appreciate the call of paddybirds or screech of crickets only on cassette tapes.

We see the encroachment of technology in the recent attempts to 'clean up the cities', that is, to rid city streets (particularly in Jakarta) of 'outmoded' forms of transport such as the 'becak' and the 'andong' (horse cart).

The dumping of hundreds of 'becaks' into the Bay of Jakarta passed without criticism and caused unrest among Jakarta 'becak' operators, who see their livelihood threatened whilst bureaucrats, technocrats, generals and the wealthy continue to prosper.

In the second poem, *Hama Wereng* (The Menace) Ariel uses the analogy of the destructive crop disease 'wereng' as a symbol of the horrors inflicted upon society by those who consider themselves 'created in the image of gods': the 'blood-sucking leaches' who though pelletlike in size, maintain an iron rule over the majority.

It is evident that Ariel has utilised his words in the most effective way possible, to convey the situation as he has perceived it. It is this sort of directness that will appeal to the public. In doing so, Ariel has succeeded in giving the people a literature 'for the people'. Through his poems, Ariel has taken it upon himself to portray the anxieties and frustrations of society, something that 'contextual literature', presumably, hopes to achieve. ●

Pramoedya invited to international writers conference

When, on the prison island of Buru, Pramoedya Ananta Toer composed his four-part novel, it would have seemed an unlikely object of world literary attention. But, the first volume, *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth Of All Mankind) has not only out-sold all previous Indonesian novels, but has also become the most translated Indonesian work.

Pramoedya is not new to international fame. Even in the period when he was incarcerated in Buru, high-school students in Malaysia were studying his *Keluarga Gerilya* (Guerilla Family) as part of their set text.

In October last year, a Swedish translation of *Bumi Manusia* was published by Hjuliet, which specialises in literature from the Third World. *Bumi Manusia* is the first novel published by Hjuliet.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer was invit-

ed to attend the 50th Congress of PEN, the international association of writers, held in May this year*. Pramoedya did not feel he would be allowed to leave the country to attend the Congress.

However, he wrote to the Congress to bring pressure on the Indonesian government to reinstate the constitutional rights and civil liberties of the ex-political prisoners. For himself, he asked that the government be persuaded to return his manuscripts seized in Buru before his release. He also asked for the return of his manuscripts and his collection of books, journals and newspapers seized, days after the military took power, in October 1965. ●

**Among guests participating in the jubilee meeting were Nathalie Sarraute, Eugene Ionesco, James Baldwin, and Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz.*

Ariel Heryanto's 'contextual' poems

Late night dialogue

*Rocking back and forth in his chair
An old man muttered to his grandchild:*

*Hm,
You only see the 'becak' and the 'andong'
In glass display cabinets at the museum
You only know through books and computers in libraries*

*The delight of swaying to the rhythm of the horses' canter
As it was in the old days
When I set out for school
These days, you have to feed cash into machines
Before you can get fried bananas or 'rujak' in a can*

*Ah, those memories; buying on credit from Siti,
As we shared a laugh at the bamboo stall
Alas,
The mountains, palm trees and waterfalls have disappeared
You'll only find them now in paintings at exhibitions
Their remnants only in the work of artists' exhibits
Buildings stand tall and arrogant
Scraping the sky, gripping the earth*

*Imagine a time when you could still enjoy
The feel of a hill-top, no asphalt, no cars
Washing body and soul by a lake
In the purity of the water and the air*

*And now; huh!
You have to buy cassette tapes and television sets
To hear the paddybird's warble or the screech of crickets*

*They all used to live in my garden
In the yard you have now filled with plastic trees and flowers*

*A, ahem..., I too understand, a-hem - a-hem
How costly it is these days to buy
Time to socialise and to love
Possessions to build a home
Let alone to order babies from test-tubes
a-hem - a-hem - a-hem...*

*'Have you taken the twelve pills and nine capsules?
I ordered for you' the grandchild enquires
Helping the old man to bed.*

The menace

*People say,
I am a citizen of the world, descendant of vermin
created in the image of gods
always sated like a blood-sucking leech
always the object of ridicule amongst neighbours*

*I am the menace
always winning the fight for food
always busy mating and breeding
cursed for exploiting others,
sought after when I can be exploited myself*

*I am the menace
caricatured and preached at
because I'm poisonous and badly behaved
not escaping prejudice and accusation
in a million speeches and newspaper reports*

*But I am the menace
who does not speak their language
who did not receive schooling like they did*

*Always busy
running and hiding
cheating and praying
always afraid and guilty
too busy eating and breeding
in danger*

*Fate dictates
I be born from left-over seed
my ancestors were destroyed
my ancestors were a threat
stabbed and burnt en masse
in the markets and on the streets*

*The fiercer the control
the more cunning and immune I will become
I remain a descendant of vermin
a legitimate citizen of the universe
created in the image of the gods
with child again!*

Edited and translated by Samantha Szeredi