

Censorship, Resistance and Transformation in Modern Indonesian Literature

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Abstract

This paper investigates the way in which Indonesian literature has reflected violations of human rights in Indonesia in the last decade of the New Order (1990-1998). The regime was authoritarian and responded harshly to any challenge which could cause trouble to national stability. Some writers, such as Seno Gumira Ajidarma, used the power of allegory to resist this oppression. The three works examined here – ‘Saksi Mata’, ‘Pelajaran Sejarah’, and ‘Misteri Kota Ninggi’ – can be considered as a form of resistance literature.

Keywords: censorship; resistance; transformation; Seno Gumira Ajidarma; modern Indonesian literature

1. Introduction

This paper examines three works by Seno Gumira Ajidarma (Seno) on human rights-related topics. As in many other countries, the boundary between literature and political advocacy has been contested in Indonesian literature since its birth. A number of fiction writers, playwrights, and poets have ventured into the territory of ‘protest’ writing. Writers such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer, W. S. Rendra, Wiji Tukul, and Seno Gumira Ajidarma are among Indonesian prominent literary figures who have been banned, jailed, or kidnapped.

In this paper, the analysis will deal with three questions. Firstly, as all the stories are preoccupied with the issue of human rights violations, I observe the reasons why Seno turns to literature of resistance to address the issue of freedom of expression. Secondly, I examine the stories in some detail. My reading of the three stories diverges from the assumptions that they merely depict the sociopolitical realities in Indonesia’s New Order of the 1990s. Thirdly, I argue that Seno is definitely resistant towards the state’s treatment of the Indonesian people’s freedom of expression, right to life and right to assembly.

2. Being Silenced: Seno’s Personal Motive to Disseminate Facts

Seno has had contradictory careers: he has been simultaneously a journalist and a writer. As a journalist, he is expected to use facts in his reportage, but as a prose writer he is free to use his skills and imagination to deliver what he wants. Interestingly, he has been successful in maintaining both forms side by side: facts to be used as sources of fiction and fiction to be used to deliver the facts. His literary career rocketed after he was threatened with being banned for publishing the humanitarian facts of the 1991 Dili massacre his team gathered in East Timor: he was suspended as an editor of *Jakarta-Jakarta (J-J)* in 1992 and two other colleagues were dismissed from their position as the editors. These incidents are the major focus of the three stories discussed here.

Peter Carey (2003: 28) divides the Indonesian occupation of East Timor into three periods: “(1) the initial years of conquest between 1975-79; (2) the middle period of the partial “consolidation” of the occupation ... (1979-89); and (3) the final decade (1989-99), which witnessed the rapid unraveling of Jakarta’s authority as the situation in East Timor became internationalized through events such as the November 12, 1991 Santa Cruz massacre.” The Dili incident was possibly the peak case of the 24 year history of the Indonesian occupation of the former Portuguese colony. Carey clearly illustrates that the last period describes the move toward insecurity East Timorese felt during their “sleeping with the enemy” (Carey, 2003: 27). The Dili incident stood as an important moment in the occupation and was of concern not only to Indonesians and East Timorese but also to International audiences.

Although Seno was not known as a controversial or subversive writer at that time, his experience as someone who was ‘banned’¹ by the government and his own employer inspired him to resist their hegemonic and political powers.

¹ Seno’s work was never formally censored. However, his being banned by the government has caused him to be more effective in writing works which can pass the censoring eyes the editors of the various media he sends his works might have applied.

These powers preferred to conceal facts about East Timor rather than to tell the truth to the public. Seno resisted the act of concealment and wanted the public to know what had really happened. Seno (2010: 371) had said: "I consciously want to make the silence fail. I fight. This makes every second of my life much more valuable than ever before." Being unemployed after his suspension, Seno never avoided opportunities to express his resistance. He found his most effective instrument in literature.

3. The Stories

The three stories: 'Saksi Mata' (Eye Witness) (1992), 'Pelajaran Sejarah' (The History Lesson) (1992), and 'Misteri Kota Ninggi' (The Mystery of the Town of Ninggi) (1993) grapple with the historical humanitarian incidents in Indonesia, which were internationally condemned and nationally deplored. They represent philosophical and practical problems with human rights discourse and rights enforcement. They also expose the loss of rights under mass oppression due to the failure of state policy to handle important problems such as military operations that open doors for the state and its apparatus to violate the rights of weaker citizens.

3.1 The first story, 'Saksi Mata', can be considered as a form of allegory. Seno presents an eye-witness who has no eyes, a man who has had his eyes scooped out by a gang of ninja. The man testifies in a courtroom about a massacre he has witnessed. He is the only one who would like to testify before the court despite his having no eyes. Instead of asking what he knows about the massacre, the judge asks him questions about when, how, and where he lost his eyes and who committed such a crime. Through his depiction of an eyeless witness with blood flowing from his eye-sockets and soaking his shirt, pants, shoes, and the floor, Seno suggests the multiple layers of cruelty and oppression an East Timorese could have experienced during and after the massacre. Through this bizarre character, Seno further presents how the ninjas have continued to destroy the rights of those who witnessed the massacre.

In the second half of the story, Seno presents additional layers of cruelty through questions of the judge to the eyewitness. The questions such as 'Can you testify?', 'Do you still remember everything that happened, even though you've no longer got any eyes?', 'Do you still remember how the massacre occurred?' 'Do you still remember how they fired wildly and people toppled like fallen banana palms?', 'Do you still remember how blood flowed, and people moaned and those who were still half alive were stabbed to death?', all refer the readers to what happened during the incident.

3.2 The second story, 'Pelajaran Sejarah' takes readers on a journey with a history teacher Alfonso who is the survivor of a massacre. Having experienced first hand the effects of the tragedy, he wants his elementary students to remember such an incident by taking them to the site of the tragedy and telling them what the real story is. In the place of the massacre, Alfonso recalls what really happened and tells them things which are not recorded in history books: many inhuman acts such as the shooting, the beating, the stabbing, inflicted upon East Timorese during the massacre.

'Pelajaran Sejarah' is largely based on the factual report of *J-J* which included a number of references such as the place and time of the event, and some pieces of information about the tragedy. It uses surrealist techniques to convey its critical message about the Indonesian military to suggest that its personnel were sadistic, cruel and inhuman in their treatment of the East Timorese. Seno makes a political attack on the government's military brutality by dramatizing the communication between a history teacher and his six grade students.

Seno's 'Pelajaran Sejarah' not only reveals what the teacher and his fellow citizens see, feel and experience, but it also implicitly tells the readers that there is much more they need to know about the tragedy than is recorded in history books. When a student asks the teacher about what cannot be learned in the classroom, he replies:

"History isn't just a record of dates and names Florencio. There's history remaining in the grass, or hidden in the wind or tossing behind the waves. History, Florencio, creeps around outside the classroom, and you have to study it". (Ajidarma, 1995: 97)

The teacher says that there are many more things which history books do not record. He tells his students that what they know about the incident is far less than what they should know. At the same time, he wants his students to know the truth that the state does not tell to the public.

3.3 The third story, 'Misteri Kota Ninggi' is presented through the eyes of a census collector. This magic-realist story begins with his first day of work; he arrives at the house of a family occupied by seven people, one of whom is dead but still present spiritually. As he moves from one house to another, he continues to find the same situation. The collector is surprised to discover that while the population of the Town of Ninggi has decreased, the population of "*saudara kami*"

(our relatives, those who are missing and coming back invisible) has increased. In the story, the census collector is puzzled by the conclusion that the population of the town of Ninggi has decreased but nobody has died because those who have been abducted and held hostages survive as invisible people and continue to live alongside their visible fellow inhabitants. It implies that the population should have reached the number of the people as noted in the census plus those who have gone missing. Seno's emphasis here on the population statistics becomes a way of announcing the number of East Timorese who have become the victims of Indonesian military occupation.

'Misteri Kota Ninggi' indicates some further tricks Seno plays to avoid censorship. For example, the naming of the Town of Ninggi is Seno's way of avoiding any mention of Dili. Seno (2010: 421) says that "Accepting the order from *Kompas* to write a short story about Christmas, I narrated how Christmas was going on there, I changed Dili into Ninggi." Seno realizes that writing Dili as Dili was not possible as any publication would almost certainly censor that. Had the strategy failed, the newspaper may have lost its right to publication. Further, the use of a Portuguese name, Adelino, also points to an East Timorese name. The second device the story uses is to quote the statistics of the town twice:

It was very strange. At a time when the world was frowning with worry because of the frightening, rapid growth in population, the population of Ninggi was shrinking. When I dug out the archives, the records for 1974 showed a total population of 688,771. But when I counted again in 1978 it seemed the population had shrunk to 329,271 people. Where had the other 359.500 gone to? It was very peculiar. (Ajidarma, 1995: 104)

Reading through the statistics of the Town of Ninggi, Seno questions the government about the decrease in the population of Dili which was more than halved. He also implies that the government was responsible for the large number of missing people, i.e., more than a hundred thousand East Timorese. Consider the following.

According to my experience as a census collector, if the rate of population growth in Ninggi was normal, that is nine per cent per annum based on data from 1970-1973, then in 1980, the population should have been 667,100. It turned out that when I counted from house to house the total was only 555.350 people. I was very surprised. There was no epidemic, no war, and no large-scale exodus, but where had those 111.750 human beings disappeared to? In one village at the edge of town, which had once had a population of 9,607, 5,021 of the population had gone missing – was it they who'd become the invisible beings, the wandering spirits? (Ajidarma, 1995: 107)

In quoting these statistics, Seno asks readers to think about the size of the decrease in population and what might have happened to them. Were they dead? If so, how had they died? Were they killed? If so, who killed them? Right until the end of the story, Seno asks his readers to deal with the tremendous decrease in population. Almost at the end of the story, Seno gives references for the length of time the decrease of population had been going on in the town:

So far, I have been living in Ninggi for fifteen years and my life was really lonely. By day I work counting people and at night I don't dare leave the house because there are gangs of masked men like ninjas. Actually, the theory is, they won't come into my house because I am only an outsider. During all this time those gangs of masked men have only entered the home of the local Ninggi people. That's the way it all happened, until the population of Ninggi has disappeared completely. (Ajidarma, 1995: 109)

Seno has provided clues as to how people had gone missing, who the perpetrators were, and over what period of time it had happened. Yet, the questions remain: who are the ninjas?, what did they do?, how?, and what was behind their actions. These are the questions readers need to ponder.

4. Concluding Remarks

Analysis of the three works: 'Saksi Mata', 'Pelajaran Sejarah', and 'Misteri Kota Ninggi,' shows Seno's *testimonio*, "the strategy attempt to control representation, to interpose a voice that has been silenced, oppressed or misrepresented, a goal which lies at the core of all interpolating strategies" (Ashcroft 2001: 114). His work is a strategy to have his voice heard.

The term *resistance*, which Harlow (1987) draws on from Kanafani can be applied to Seno Gumira Ajidarma's East Timor fiction: the stories are a form of cultural resistance in which Seno resists the state policy of political and military aggression in East Timor. These policies resulted in state oppression of the people who were powerless to defend themselves. Seno has used techniques in order to mourn the disregard of those rights.

Although these stories were not written by the colonized East Timorese themselves, they do speak for them. The stories resist what Kanafani (in Harlow, 1987) calls the "occupying power", the Indonesian military. Unlike Palestinian

literature which resists the Israeli occupation, for example, Seno's stories do not call for independence. However they do speak the forbidden truth in the wider Indonesian context. In other words, Seno, through his East Timor stories, resists any type of gagging or pre-censorship: whether that be governmental, institutional, or self-censorship.

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