Abstract

This paper argues that contemporary Indonesian literature has been witnessing the return of some key elements of orality despite, or exactly because of, the advent of the digital era. Orality, which is supposed to have been fading out since the introduction of print literacy, seems to have been brought back to life as we enter the digital age rather than fade away further. This is visible particularly in the use of vernacular and conversational language in dialogues, heightened by the use of rural settings and unreliable narrators/characters. Such a renewed interest in orality among writers helps enrich the variety and heterogeneity of contemporary Indonesian literature in the last decade.

Keywords

contemporary Indonesian literature, return of orality, vernacular language, rural setting, digital age

THE RETURN OF ORALITY IN INDONESIAN LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL LITERACY

Likhaan: University of the Philippines–Institute of Creative Writing (UP ICW)
Speaker: Manneke Budiman (Indonesia)
Reactors: Arlo Mendoza, Dominic Sy, Ariel Lopez
Moderators: Luna Sicat Cleto, Ramon Guillermo

THE ASIAN LITERARY Forum hopes to create a medium for a Filipino audience to learn about the state of contemporary literature in selected Asian countries. The UP ICW invites respected literary scholars or writers to deliver lectures on the state of contemporary literatures in the different genres and in the major literary languages in their respective countries.This was the first held on December 9, 2022, with Professor Manneke Budiman as main speaker and Arlo Mendoza, Dominic Sy, and Ariel Lopez as reactors. Luna Sicat Cleto and Ramon Guillermo, UP ICW deputy director and associate, respectively, served as moderators. It was livestreamed via Zoom on UP ICW's Facebook page.

LUNA SICAT CLETO: Today we focus on Indonesian literature with speaker and reactors.

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MANNEKE BUDIMAN: I would like to present a topic on contemporary Indonesian literature: the return of orality in Indonesian literature in light of the age of digital literacy that we witness at present.I will briefly go back to the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, because for many scholars, this period was a kind of renaissance for modern Indonesian literature. Despite the Cold War at that time, especially in Southeast Asia, where a very violent and fierce ideological polarization between the left and the right was taking place, writers and artists across the archipelago continued with enthusiasm to further explore different visions, possibilities, opportunities, and futures for Indonesian culture—a culture that was considerably young at that time, after the independence. We immediately plunged into the Cold War. Writers and artists engaged in that ideological war, yet at the same time, they continued working together to look for visions, to look for the best configuration of what Indonesian literature or Indonesian culture in a larger scale should look like.

There was a dilemma between the strong drive to return to traditions on the one hand and the awareness of the need to embrace modernity on the other to catch up with the rest of the free world. It was between these two opposite forces that artists and writers opened up their horizon to what other people in other countries were doing with their culture and literature. It is interesting to note that these young writers, mostly in their twenties or early thirties, believed in and perceived of Indonesian culture as heir to world culture. It was a manifesto in fact. The writers then experimented with different local traditions, much like what other artists and writers were doing in other countries. They dug up the local traditions that were previously ignored and tried to create using these resources, used in various ways by blending imported thoughts, ideas, cultures, and models with local existing models. This was basically the activity in the 1950s and in the first half of the 1960s in Indonesian literature.Then, suddenly, this stopped because of the coup on September 30, 1965. Since then, everything changed. It will never be the same again

for Indonesia and for Indonesian culture or literature. We saw a new page in Indonesian politics in which the New Order then took power and continued to rule the country for the next thirty-two years, with their prejudice and hostility toward arts and culture. It is no wonder that we saw heavy censorship and difficult situations that authors and artists had to endure throughout this period.

Then, from 1997–1998, the Asian monetary crisis hit Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries quite hard. Indonesians saw how corrupt and shaky the foundation and legitimacy of the New Order's thirty-two years of rule was. This all culminated in May 1998, with riots and the alleged mass rape of Chinese Indonesian women. But the event ended with the New Order stepping down from power. A new era was opened for Indonesian people, a time of freedom and democratization, which we popularly call the Reformasi. Along with it, there emerged new critical voices by a new generation of writers who were never heard of nor read before. They became part of Indonesian literary society.We had an explosion of literary production in the aftermath of the Reformasi, say, between the first five years all the way to the end of the first decade. Many literary critics believed Indonesia was undergoing a renaissance after more than thirty-two years of the repressive New Order rule. Distinctive aspects of literature became visible and occurred in many of the literary works of this time. Here are some of the new trends: First, there seemed to be a common sense of skepticism toward the nation. Any notion of "national" in literature, culture, and identity was perceived to be the legacy of the New Order. These young writers and artists brought in a paradigm shift from a domestic, national outlook into something more global and cosmopolitan. They were really enchanted and fascinated by imaginative adventures beyond the official borders of the nation-state, venturing to other countries as seen in the many works produced at the time.Second, there was an opposite trend taking place. It was not something outward or cosmopolitan but rather a more inward look. Thus, along with the effort to break free from nationalist constraints, these writers had a renewed interest in local traditions and colors, indigenous knowledge, and local wisdom, which were suppressed in the New Order period. These two trends became the new characteristics of Indonesian literature in the aftermath of the Reformasi. We literally saw works being read by the audience—works written by the old masters, such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Fr. Mangunwijaya, alongside those by new writers, including

Nukila Amal, Ayu Utami, and Linda Christanty. These young writers did not really live in the shadow of their seniors but created a position for themselves alongside their seniors. These writers also produced stories set outside Indonesia, with characters who travelled and met other peoples from other cultures without any fear of being lost or being a stranger among strangers and were able to redefine their Indonesia-ness within the new global and national nexus.

At the same time, the critical exploration of traditions also began to construct a type of Indonesia-ness that was different from the New Order's selective multiculturalism. This is important because, for these new young writers who for the most part of their lives had their career in Jakarta or Java, it was like an encounter with something unfamiliar. Talking about their hometowns in faraway islands in the eastern or western part of Indonesia seemed very exciting. This phenomenon was frequent in many works, a recurring feature in contemporary Indonesian literature. I can safely assume that locality had become a dominant dimension in addition to the cosmopolitanism. There were more voices from the margins, from faraway places of the archipelago, such as Aceh. Authors wrote stories about the Acehnese separatist conflict, such as Arafat Nur, often in relation to the tsunami. Some stories from Bali by local writers, such as Oka Rusmini, are critical responses to the Hindu Balinese *adat* or customary practice. From Lombok came a story of religious persecution of the Ahmadi Muslim minority by the Muslim majority group, written by Okky Madasari. We also saw critical views of the existing tradition or religious practices from a modern outlook by authors such as Abidah El Khalieqy. From Maluku, there were stories of interreligious conflict between the Muslim and the Christians (Erny Aladjai); and from Papua, stories of militarism and environmental destruction by multinational corporations (Anindita S. Thayf). We also had stories written in a new perspective about the rural areas in Java, hardly touched by writers from the New Order period. Many writers took the age-old competition between the two primary school of Islamic thoughts: the Muhammadiyah and the Nahdatul Ulama within the Islamic communities as the subject of their writings (Mahfud Ikhwan).

There were other voices coming from the margins, such as the emerging literary movement that looked inward into what was left behind, missing, or forgotten. There was this sense of incompleteness and restlessness among present-day writers because of what may have been missing from

the dominant construct of Indonesian-ness. In an effort to represent locals and everyday life, they tended to employ realism through vernacular languages and expressions. The settings were frequently villages or rural communities in remote islands and places. This could be an attempt not only to establish a distinction from Java and the capital city of Jakarta but also to move away from a centralized notion of New Order construct Indonesian-ness.Thus, this is the focus of my talk: the return to orality. There is a significant presence of orality in the dialogues among the characters in those works which take the form of the use of local vocabulary, elliptic sentences, or incomplete utterances. It is conversational in tone and in terms of the atmosphere, with local jokes, anecdotes, metaphors, and proverbs. Dialogues are interrupted by laughter, as if the readers are sitting together with the characters and listening to the storyteller or the narrator. It is an atmosphere dominated by orality. This resistance to the formalized use of the Indonesian language, which, according to writers such as Afrizal Malna and Pramoedya Ananta Toer, has robbed the people of their self-articulation. They are not encouraged to use their local languages but must learn Bahasa Indonesia as a second language. During the New Order period, the Indonesian language was systematically and structurally imposed as the official language. As a result, most Indonesian literary works of that era were written in the standard formal Indonesian language.We see the effort to resist such a nationalistic constraint among these writers. Many works demonstrate a cosmopolitan spirit, another manifestation of resistance to the national language. In these works, one can encounter characters speaking different languages, such as English, Arabic, Thai, Burmese, Spanish—sometimes mixed in the conversations among characters of different nationalities and backgrounds. One can also see code-switching or code-mixing in Indonesian and other languages, which can undermine the primacy of the Indonesian language as the "national" language, which had resulted in normative boundaries of the national language that was made scared during the New Order period but now is breached, both inwardly through the use of local languages and outwardly through the clearly visible presence of foreign languages in dialogues. The cosmopolitan dream of the writers from the 1950s is coming back. They reawaken this heir-of-world culture vision by contributing to world cultures, absorbing them, and blending them with local elements and richness. Once done, these writers claim or appropriate the final results as Indonesian and at the same time global. For such an

aesthetic endeavor, writers create their alternative vision of Indonesian aesthetics as different from the one promoted by the New Order.

The return to orality is intriguing because it occurs at a time when communication and digital technologies provide more space and possibilities for writers and artists to experiment with new forms. Some authors have begun to exploit these technologies to produce works that can be called digital literature that include visual forms, color, and digital shapes. One can see them on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and multimedia novels on YouTube but also fanfiction available for viewing in various websites.

The rise of digital literacy also brings orality back into literature rather than canceling each other out. We now have a narrower gap between orality and literacy—not one that gets wider, as many have feared of. The apprehension that literacy sophistication diminishes the presence of orality from written works does not happen here. Indonesia also witnesses the emergence of diverse trends. We have Islamic, *sastra Islam*, fanfiction (digital-based fiction), *sastra maritim* (maritime literature), urban, cyber, and many other labels of the literary genre.There are overlaps between genre and movement. It is a genre and at the same time a movement. One sees the appearance of a new genre based on a multimodality that is made possible by the application of technology, but it is also a kind of an emerging movement among new writers. This is clearly the result of technological intervention, which influences and shapes genre because of the features provided by those technological platforms.

ARLO MENDOZA: Like most foreign readers, my first introduction to Indonesian literature was through the works of Chairil Anwar and other members of the famed Angkatan 45, which includes Asrul Sani and Sitor Situmorang, among others. There's also Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Buru Quartet* and several works of the Angkatan 66 generation. This [generation] includes writers such as Goenawan Mohamad and Rendra, among many others. These are writers and literary sensibilities that are easy to fit within a specific national narrative. In the case of Angkatan 45, they were seen as the prophets of the Indonesian revolution. In the case of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, many critics and writers see him as the quintessential postcolonial novelist, especially with his *Buru Quartet*, although we know that he has more works to show for. For the Angkatan 66, some of its members and some critics note that this generation

signaled the end of political commitment as a constitutive part of literary activity, at least in Indonesia. These are the first works I read as a foreign reader of Indonesian literature. As a well-versed reader of Philippine literature, familiar with my own national literary history, I can see all the convergences, I see the similarities. And that is what got me interested in Indonesian literature in the first place. However, when I started learning the language and I started reading other writers, I stumbled upon the works of writers such as Seno Gumira Ajidarma, Wiji Thukul, Ayu Utami, and, of course, he's very popular now in the Philippines, Eka Kurniawan. And personally, when I encountered their works, I felt that they were several of the few that clearly broke away from the mold of Indonesian literature and that tried to peddle a specific national narrative. Or these were perhaps literary works that tried to address the specters, the hauntings, and the ghosts of previous historical events in the nation. For instance, you see in Ayu Utami and Eka Kurniawan, of course, a different handling of '65 [1965 Indonesian.Genocide]. And for Seno Gumira Ajidarma, when I read *Jazz, Parfum dan Insiden* (Jazz, Perfume, and the Incident), it was really a revelation because it was one of the first exposés on the Dili massacre (or the Santa Cruz massacre) in Timor-Leste. In the case of Widji Thukul, it is very interesting because a lot of people signed on the death knell of committed literature in Indonesia. But during the 1980s and 1990s, he was part of the labor movement and was also writing poetry about the experiences of the oppressed, the workers, the peasants. I think they were the first writers who showed me a different side of Indonesian literature. There are of course other writers, as mentioned in the presentation. It was really a revelation for me when I encountered their works. There are two more factors that push Indonesian literature toward the direction where it is heading right now. First are the small presses or *penerbit kecil*. The second is translation, both regional and international. Small independent publishers such as Marjin Kiri, Ultimus, Kominutas Bambu, INSIST Press, Kendi, Buku Mojok, and Mooi Pustaka, among many others, have given Indonesian writers who are in the peripheries or who refuse to engage with national literary establishment the opportunity to be published and be heard. Personally, I discovered writers such as Dea Anugrah, Eko Triono, Intan Paramaditha, Ratih Kumala, Sabda Armandio, and Saut Situmorang, among many others, through these small presses. These publishers not only contributed to the growth and diversity of contemporary Indonesian

literature but also made strides in other fields such as history, politics, cultural studies, and translation. I fondly, for instance, remember buying a book that collected the documents for the forty-fifth anniversary of the Communist Party of Indonesia, and it was published by Ultimus. I would not imagine any university press or Gramedia to be publishing a book like that. It was interesting for me that such a dynamic exists between small presses, mainstream publishers, and university publishers in Indonesia, because in the Philippines, it is kind of similar, but that's a discussion for later.

This brings me to my second point: translation. So while Max Lane's, Harry Aveling's, and John McGlynn's efforts were instrumental in introducing Indonesian literature to a wider audience in the twentieth century and early twenty-first century, what with publications such as [the Menagerie series] and imprints such as Lontar, it is also a translation, interestingly, and a new generation of translators has been responsible in introducing a new crop of Indonesian writers to foreign readers. For instance, through the efforts of Annie Tucker and Stephen Epstein, the novels of Eka Kurniawan and Intan Paramaditha have gained global readership. I remember reading *Gentayangan* when I just gained my Lanjut Dua Certification for Bahasa Indonesia, and I was able to read it in the original. After I read Stephen Epstein's translation of *Gentayangan,* or *The Wandering*, I saw a lot of possibilities. I also understood it a bit more because as a fledgling and aspiring translator of Indonesian literature, I was already starting to think like a translator. But just to plug the novel, it is really an interesting novel. It was kind of modeled after Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, where there is no linear narrative and you are under the whim of the author. So, through the efforts of Annie Tucker and Stephen Epstein, Eka Kurniawan and Intan Paramaditha gained global readership. Lara Norgaard and Tiffany Tsao's efforts, which won them PEN/Heim Translation Grants, ushered in the entry of Sabda Armandio and Norman Erikson Pasaribu to the world. I think Khairani Barokka, an Indonesian poet and translator, should be mentioned here as well. Her efforts as an editor, currently as editor-at-large of *Modern Poetry in Translation* magazine, must also be recognized. When I last spoke to her two weeks ago, she told me that she was planning to edit an issue that features not only Indonesian and Filipino writers but also other Southeast Asian writers. There are also publishers such as Two Lines, Deep Vellum, and Tilted Axis that favor writing or translations from Southeast Asia. For

instance, Tilted Axis has a very interesting roster of Indonesian writers. I think Norman Erikson Pasaribu's poetry collection was published by Tilted Axis. It is very interesting because compared with, for instance, the twentieth century where most of the translators were foreigners, we see an influx of translators from Southeast Asia. For instance, Tiffany Tsao is half-Indonesian, half-Singaporean. We see an influx of translators from the region or from Indonesia translating works from Indonesia for foreign readers or for our global audience. To end, I want to register my agreement with Professor Budiman's assessment of the difficulty of putting a label on the current trends and directions in Indonesian literature. I think before Sastra Reformasi and Sastra Pasca Reformasi, there was also this attempt to label it as Angkatan Kontemporer, and it of course did not fly. I guess for literature clearly refusing to just churn out Jamesonian national allegories, the clear recourse is to gesture toward the new configurations, experimentation, cosmopolitanism, and an antipodal return to tradition to interrupt and disrupt the crystallized narratives and shibboleths of old.

ARIEL LOPEZ: I am not from the literary field but a historian. Some concepts really caught my attention: the increasing importance of locality, orality, and the rise of the vernacular. During this unique period in Indonesian literary history, after the New Order, or the post-Reformasi period, we have this sort of literary flourishing, as you have seen in 1950s Indonesia. But having said that, I have a couple of questions, and hopefully this could start a conversation. I see somehow a contrast, perhaps a contradiction between what you see, the rising importance of locality, but also because of what the global outlook as you call it of these writers. I would like to know more about how writers navigate these two contradicting themes of locality and global outlook. That is also my observation on the rise of, say, sastra Islam, which I would imagine would be more universalist in theme, or cosmopolitan. And how does locality figure into that?

The second question, I think, is about audience. If you look at … if you sort of disaggregate the demographics, say, which genre would be more popular to a particular age group or gender? Or perhaps even class, or geographic location—rural, urban. Because you have already mentioned the rise of literary production in Aceh, in Eastern Indonesia, perhaps also in Sulawesi and different parts of Java, but I would like to know more about

the gender part or age group. I would imagine more young people would consume the digital, those who have the digital component than the older ones. And, plastic ramps or even ethnicity. The third, already mentioned by Arlo Mendoza, is about the circulation of these literary works. I would like to add: How do big, popular bookstores like, say, Gramedia or Periplus sort of influence which books are being circulated and which writers are read? Do they prefer regional bookstores or regional presses in other islands outside Java? Is there a government subsidy for these small presses? Can they get an individual author's support from such cultural institutions as maybe the Balai Pelestarian Kebudayaan, or these kinds of funding for cultural bodies? And fourth, I hear from colleagues that it is still hard to write on difficult periods of Indonesian history; you always have the military and government hanging at the background. But I guess this is the power of literature—that it could think about history and historical sources. Many of the historical sources are either destroyed or still gatekept in various institutions. Historical fiction is not subject to those rules. I think this is important, but also I would like to know from colleagues doing history. There are a few hundred history departments in Indonesia, but we only get to listen or read works from big universities. I wonder, do many of them teach this new emerging literature? What kind of literature is being taught, read, not only in big cosmopolitan universities but even in very faraway universities and even teacher's colleges. Second to the last point: Well, this morning I attended a thesis defense on soft power. I am tempted to say that Indonesia has this emerging literary production. Indonesia has been part of the Frankfurt Book Fair. It is amazing. But where do you see this rise of Indonesian literary production going? Most of the historical production in Indonesia is produced by a wider academic scene, by Western universities, White academics. But I think it is high time to really project these cultural achievements of individual Indonesian authors. Maybe recommendations, thoughts on how we move forward in promoting Indonesian literature. A few days ago, we have this news of the criminal code of Indonesia being revised. Are we seeing a trend toward general social conservatism in Indonesia, and do you think this would reflect in the literary production? Or is it already reflected in the kinds of work that's being produced?

DOMINIC SY: I really only have about three main questions. The first is kind of theoretical, very abstract. I was struck by the idea of orality.

I was wondering … I know a lot of the discussion, our framework for understanding orality, is highly influenced by Walter Ong, who himself makes a differentiation between primary and secondary orality. Secondary orality is the orality in a culture that is already literate. I was wondering, just in terms of describing this new kind of orality that is emerging in the internet and of course in literature, to what extent is that different from previous kinds of orality? Like, what does it mean? What are its characteristics? Because orality is not necessarily the same, and the other components of the culture, literate components of culture, will change the dimensions of that orality. So that's the first thing I thought of. The other questions might need a little more introduction.

The first one is about this idea of diversity, whether there are these more structural or kind of like constraints to this diversity that may not be immediately obvious. I was teaching Southeast Asian literature before I got into Indonesian literature. My specialization was Philippine literature in English. I also did some work in the Cultural Center of the Philippines's *Encyclopedia of Philippine Art*. I read a lot about various critics in the Philippines and how they tried to periodize Philippine literature. And once, I found it very funny. When I got into Indonesian literature, and I was reading similar works about the baddies and katans…. Once you get past the dictatorial period, whether it's Martial Law in the Philippines or Orde Baru in Indonesia, it is described in the same way. It is very diverse; it is kind of funny. You kind of also sometimes get a sense that the critics gave up in trying to characterize it because basically it is, "Oh, so we had a period of dictatorship." And in this period, there were constraints on literature, and there was a lot of tension. There were those who kind of not necessarily collaborated with the government but stayed silent or kept to themselves. There were those who fought regardless. There is a very clear narrative. And then once the dictatorial period is over, it's very much, "And there was an explosion of genres, styles, and all these different forms." I know that the explanations are all very similar. One of them, I think the most obvious one, is a loosening of political control, right? So, there is more freedom to publish, more freedom to write, more people that are writing in different ways. In a sense, depending on which community you're looking at, the big bad enemy has kind of disappeared. There is a little more fragmentation in terms of what people are interested in.

Other things that were brought up were issues such as globalization. In theory at least, that means that there is more. This might be a very

technical way of putting it, but, let us say, cultural inputs from different places in the world. These influences are having their own forms of influence. Then, there is the internet, the digital age, which is kind of an even more exaggerated version of that. And as a result, yes, an explosion of genres, many different styles, a combination of media, forms of media, an emergence for example of many writings from minority groups, groups that were ignored previously, that also happened here especially after Martial Law. Regional … the emphasis on the regions moving away from especially Manila. Manila and Jakarta are very similar cities that when I went to Jakarta, I was struck by how horribly similar it was, and I wanted to get away as soon as possible. It is the same problem: Jakarta-centrism or Manila-centrism. Then a movement tried to get away from that. And so, an explosion of regional literature. In the Philippines, workshops are a big deal, at least as far as literary institutions are concerned, and there's an explosion of workshops among different provinces and regions. Those are all a very similar pattern of emerging diversity. In the case of Philippine literature in English, again, that's kind of a weird, specific tradition we have. I noticed a very clear constraint or a kind of a limited pattern whereby there was a lot of change and experimentation, but it is clear where the influences come from most, and that influence is very America-centric. In America, they read Latin American literature, and ten years later, Filipinos read Latin American literature and start to write a little bit like it. In America, suddenly they read Eka Kurniawan, and then ten years after he is published in English, Filipinos start to read him. There is this very clear kind of a bottleneck that passes through North America that comes to us, and that's true even when it comes to experimentation of genre. So about ten to fifteen years ago there's a lot of talk about *Overwrited*, the first Filipino crime novel for example in English and stuff like that. The emergence of Filipino speculative fiction was a big term that was being bandied around. It is always hybridized. It is never completely copied or anything, but it is very clear that the terms of the genres and a lot of the times the influences are not completely America-centric, but it is passing through the literary institutions of New York, or maybe London, sometimes Paris. To me, that is an obvious kind of constraint. It is globalization, but globalization itself has its centers. To what extent does contemporary Indonesian literature reflect those kinds of constraints? I noticed it is mentioned that in contemporary Indonesian literature, they are recovering the promise of the 1950s—i.e., Indonesian

culture as heir of the world. It is from the Surat Kepercayaan Gelanggang, which is the "Kami adalah ahli waris yang sah dari kebudayaan dunia." So we are the true heirs of world culture. But in the 1950s and '60s, I know things were different. I mean, in the sense not just that Indonesia and the Philippines were kind of being constructed as national entities but in a way the world itself was also engaged in a debate. Like, what does it mean to have the world for the world to exist? That was in the context of the Cold War. I remember when I was in Jakarta and felt that horrible sense that I am back in Manila. I spent a lot of time in the proposed National Library and was going through the cultural pages of *Bintang Timur*, a popular daily back in the 1950s and 1960s. In the early 1960s, it was edited by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. I was struck by the very clear effort in those pages to promote writers from Africa and Asia. Obviously, this is partly a result of the Van Gogh conference, the African Asian Writers Conference, and all of these pushed for a Third World movement. It was also influenced by the Cold War context, right? We had a world that was very much dominated by North America and Western Europe, though there were other possible centers, such as Moscow and Beijing. In the case of Pramoedya, I think he had a bit of Beijing as a possible choice as center. He was trying to promote writers from these other places as compared to everything following one bottleneck in North America or Western Europe. Or the Frankfurt Book Fair, perhaps. I was wondering if in terms of this diversity, if you nevertheless see certain kinds of patterns of constraint. That does not necessarily mean the diversity that exists, but it is perhaps a pattern we can pay attention to, and maybe if we want to expand the diversity even further, and if we really believe in the promise of diversity as something we can consciously work to fix perhaps.My last question is about the rise of conservatism recently, since the Philippines and Indonesia have a very similar period of dictatorship. There was the Cold War, one of the reasons why this period existed, right? The dictatorship had supposedly ended, and suddenly there was democratic opening and freedom. But I know that both countries have a lot of discussion over the last few years about the ways in which the dictatorship has returned or is on the verge of possible return. I think it is more possible in the Philippines given the recent election results. But in general, that's the question. There's a sense of this kind of return to that older period, a return to Martial Law, or a return to some elements of Martial Law. In Indonesia, three years ago, there were the Reformasi groups, right? When I was in Yogyakarta

finally away from Jakarta, I was going through various bookstores, mostly the indie bookstores. I was looking for writers who were banned during the Orde Baru. This was around 2018–2019. I remember one instance where I was asking for some of these writers, and the owner told me, we have a copy of that. Then he kind of gestured for me to come closer. Then he started whispering and he said, be careful who you ask about those authors. Be careful where you go and mention the names of those authors. Don't say it out too loud, and I said what's going on? And he was talking about how very recently, they had experienced a couple of raids in some of these stores, and some of these things got confiscated, and I know it was around 2018–2019 that it hit Indonesian news. There were stores in Kedili and Padang and in various places where books were being confiscated. The Philippines is experiencing very much the same thing over the last few years. A lot of libraries in state universities and colleges are pressured to remove supposedly subversive books, and many of those books are books that discuss Martial Law. And just recently, the Commission on the Filipino Language was instructed by the government to stop publishing some of its books that dealt with the Martial Law era. There is a crackdown that has started to happen once again. It is on the rise. Will it continue, who knows? How much would we be able to fight it? To what extent do we link to that expansion of freedom? Is there a sense that it might be ending soon? Or is there a sense that this is not ending, perhaps, but it's being threatened? And how are people responding to that? How are people responding to this kind of rise of conservatism, a return to certain Orde Baru policies, for example? One of the reasons why I think a lot of us get into Indonesia is because we look at Indonesian history and literature, and we think it is like us.

RAMON GUILLERMO: We can start with trying to reply to some of the questions. Many are difficult to answer, but we would be very happy if you could enlighten us on some of these questions.

MANNEKE BUDIMAN: These questions range from the ecosystem of literature and then to the historical, social, political aspects, and all the way to the global context—expanding the topic of fundamental Indonesian literature issues into a larger perspective. To Arlo: There is a small publisher called Dalang Publishing in San Mateo, California, which promotes Indonesian writers, many of whom are younger and relatively

unknown to international readership. In addition to Lontar Foundation, there is the Kompas-Gramedia publisher that has begun to do translations of literary works, mostly into English. Let me start with a complaint: Why does Southeast Asian literature in general, Indonesian in particular, hardly make it into international readership compared to Indian or African literature that could easily get into Penguin, Heinemann, and so on? People only know Pramoedya Ananta Toer for so many years, and now Eka Kurniawan after his book was introduced and promoted at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2015.

For many Indonesian writers, the main concern is how to be read and known by 270 million Indonesians. With many authors writing about specific local colors, the work of translation becomes even more challenging because there are concepts and terms whose equivalents can hardly be found in any other language, even in the Indonesian language. And any translator who would want to take up the challenge would have a hard time doing so, especially in the next step in which they have to deal with international publishers. The future for the translation of Indonesian literature, if the current trend continues, is uncertain. Yet, that does not prevent writers to continue writing about the locals and introduce more local terms and concepts. How is it going to be translated? Not easy at all, but the grim prospect of being internationally known does not stop Indonesian writers from continuing with the vision they think is best. If they now revisit traditions and the local knowledge, I do not think that will be discouraged by the prospect of publication by international publishers. Then we talk about the breakup from old mainstream literature. You mentioned Seno Gumira Ajidarma, Wiji Thuku, Ayu Utami, and Eka Kurniawan. Most of these writers are relatively junior in comparison to Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Goenawan Mohamad, or Mangunwijaya. Seno and Ayu were journalists before they became literary authors. But there are also many more authors that are not in the same sense that we understand as "author," like those belonging to the Salihara Community, for instance. These are authors who are on the streets, who do not have any community basis. They are everywhere, including in remote islands and rural areas far from Jakarta, and they come from every kind of walks of life. There is skepticism with whatever is left by the New Order, including the way we look at history, how it is constructed. That is why many writers of the post-Reformasi generation do not talk about history at all, almost ahistorical. If you look at Ayu Utami's earlier works—*Saman*, *Larung*—

they are ahistorical. Many of them do not want to talk about the past at all. Mangunwijaya, Pramoedya, they talk about the past, but it is a long past. Mangunwijaya went back to the ancient era, all this ancient glory and kingdoms. And then Pram, he actually talked about the present, but he hid it behind the colonial past while actually talking about the New Order. There is a hesitant attitude to talk about history among the younger generation. That is why Ayu Utami's generation looks more toward what is beyond Indonesia. Contemporary and current, but not in Indonesia. Because if you confine yourself in the Indonesian context, you will be forced to talk about history.

But ten years after the Reformasi, suddenly there emerged a concerted effort to talk about what happened in 1965. Not all with equal success, of course. And then it was gone. People did not talk about it anymore. Whether they felt saturated by the topic or developed new interests, we are not sure. Maybe the urge to follow a trend that is temporary could be the reason. But it does not really divert writers from their main vision. If they go cosmopolitan, then we will still see a very strong flavor of cosmopolitanism. If they go back to tradition, you will still see the superiority, the uniqueness of these authors, which lies in the ability to present traditions in creative and imaginative ways. So, that is probably what I can respond to the question that Arlo has raised.

I want to make sense of this contradiction as a convergence of different visions of Indonesia and of Indonesian literature. Some of the authors write both about tradition and cosmopolitan issues, but many can be safely grouped as local-color writers. In the same way, there are writers interested in secular issues and others in the Islamic *syiar*. And that is why we have sastra Islam, *sastra pesantren*, and now *sastra perempuan pesantren* as subgenres. Thus, rather than seeing them as contradictions, I propose to see them as simultaneous convergences. How does locality figure into universalism, because cosmopolitanism seems associated with universalism? If you look at those cosmopolitan writers, say Fira Basuki, who writes several novels about her experience of living in Singapore, marrying a Nepalese husband … the setting is Singapore, yet she writes about Indonesian issues all the time. This is another contradiction. You are outside Indonesia, but you keep on writing about it. There is Leila Chudori, whose most recent novel *Pulang* is set in Paris. From the title alone, you can see it has to do with being homebound. It is about going back to Indonesia, bringing the world

home, bringing the world to Indonesia. rather than bringing Indonesia out into the world. So, that is a way to explain it. If it is true that what is happening is that the world is being brought home, the global goes local, then we can more easily figure it out. Home is being redefined from the outside and inside—a diversity that relates to ethnic and religious backgrounds, to age, and to the rural.

One thing that I cannot really answer with certainty is: Why are so many literary works produced? Why so many new writers? The publishing industry is shrinking; only Gramedia holds the monopoly of literary production. What about all those small publishing in Yogyakarta and Bandung? They operate with the help of technology. Now, we do not have to open a bookstore nor submit new books to Gramedia, which demands a lot of percentage from the profit and a large commission from authors. What authors do now is use online shopping platforms. Authors no longer send their books to publishing companies; instead, books are made at home, which buyers can order through online platforms. In two days, one receives the book and, if not satisfied, one can return it for refund. Only Gramedia has been able to sustain its business; even Periplus has closed its branches in many locations—whereas the small local publishing enterprises are sustained through online shopping platforms. And that's what keeps them and the writers alive.

Is there any subsidy or support from the state? Yes. In the last five years, we have seen that Badan Bahasa, an institution under the Ministry of Education and Culture responsible with safeguarding the Indonesian language, has begun to do something. They provide grants, subsidies, sponsorships, *sayembara* or contests, and writer-in-residence programs. It also works with other ASEAN countries, although right now, it is limited to Malay and Indonesian literature, and hence to countries such as Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, and, to a certain extent, Thailand. Other Asian countries, including the Philippines, are not invited to the Masyarakat Sastra Asia Tenggara or Mastera, which meets every year. As far as I know, it is a pleasant surprise that Badan Bahasa does not apply censorship. Even if the work talks about 1965 or other kinds of past state atrocities, they allow people like me, who are not bureaucrats nor part of the state, to help them in the curation. So, Melani Budianta from Universitas Indonesia, Faruk from Gadja Mada University, and folks from Padjadjaran University in Bandung are now actively involved in the adjudication, selection, and recommendation of grantees. And

in that way, censorship (like what happened in the past in the activities sponsored by state institutions) can be prevented or avoided.

Where does this rise of Indonesian literature go? Can this be a kind of soft power initiative, even if only limited in the Southeast Asian region? No, unless the narrow scope of Malay language or Indonesian language is done away with. Can we introduce literary collaboration without any preferential language in the Southeast Asian region? The only constraint is the Bahasa Indonesia or Bahasa Melayu as prerequsite. That is why only four countries in Southeast Asia can get involved. I am not aware of any other state program other than the Majelis that preserves Bahasa Melayu or Indonesia (Dewan Bahasa in Brunei, Majelis Bahasa in Malaysia, Badan Bahasa in Indonesia). And so, literature fails even to be a soft power within our own region. How can we make it "odorless" or agile, like K-pop? K-pop is accepted everywhere because people can easily associate with it. But how can you make ten Asian nations to be at home with Bahasa? That is not the way we understand diversity, right? It is because you are the majority that everybody else must go along with you. Is there any problem with authors writing about the dark past of Indonesia? I am not aware of any. Okay, in certain places in Yogyakarta and Solo, we have seen a very disturbing rise of radicalism, but it is not a state-sanctioned radicalism. It is a kind of fascism that grows in civil society rather than designed by the political society or by the state.

The state, in fact, is trying hard to curb them, but their success is relatively low. Any critical writing or discussion that deals with the new literature of 1965 usually comes from radical Islamist groups or movements that are especially strong in Central Java, especially in Yogyakarta and Solo, despite the fact that these two are the most diverse and heterogeneous cities. How do I understand this? My understanding is that instead of perceiving it as the rise of Islamism or radicalism, we can consider the phenomenon as a desperate final attempt to exist because they know that the state is no longer behind them. Even the security forces, the police, and so on are forced to act more strongly and more firmly against these groups. In the past, they may have had enjoyed the silent support of the security or state institutions. Nowadays, that is not the case. But, because of that, they try to show that they still exist, though in a desperate mode.

In connection to the new penal code, that is quite controversial. I don't know, but this is my personal take. I am happy with the new code. I compare it with the old one not because of an ideal that activists want to realize

but to contrast it with what existed before. For instance, if one commits extramarital sex, it is punishable in the new penal code. But then it is not that easy anymore. It is something that people could easily do in the past. If I stayed in a hotel with somebody who is not my spouse, then everybody could come, break the door, and arrest me. But now with the new law, the only person that can legitimately file a report for the police to be able to interfere into whatever you do in that hotel room is your spouse or, in the case of a minor, the parents. So, if my wife does not know and does not report it to the police, then they cannot take the law into their own hand. In the past, they took the initiative without anybody reporting. It is the same with premarital sex, for which my understanding is for underage kids. Why? Because the law connects the sanction for premarital sex with parents reporting. Can anybody else report? No, only concerned parents can report. Without that report, nobody can do anything. In the past, even civilians who are not police officers could just break into your room and punish you socially and morally.Now, why does the new penal code still regulate these issues? It is because that is the best compromise they can achieve with the social, political, and cultural forces outside. One cannot start from zero, and then suddenly you get one hundred. But now we have fifty, somewhere in between. Rather than seeing it as a way to punish citizens, it is more a way to prevent vigilantism and people who think they can put the law into their own hands. Is it punishable by the law? Yes, but only if the spouse is the one who reports it or the parents if you are underage. With LGBTQ, it is the same. If one is an underage person, the parents could report. If I am a part of the LGBTQ community, no spouse will naturally report me. If I were involved in extramarital homosexual intercourse, I would be safe. But the lawmaker has to stipulate something regarding this issue to calm down the conservative social elements as well as those in the parliament and the bureaucratic structure and obtain their approval so the law can be amended. It is a continuing negotiation. It does not stop with this new law. I do not see rising conservatism or any possibility that conservatism will be back and take over whatever freedom that we have enjoyed so far. This is my understanding of the current penal code.

With regards to the influence of North America on the development of Indonesian literature, there is not much to say because we do not see enough Indonesian literature in the international scene. Another complaint: If I accept North American centrality, then I will demand

that they do more in order to introduce our literature to the world. But, besides Ayu Utami, Eka Kurniawan, and Pramoedya Ananta Toer, which other Indonesian writers are widely known in the international world? Almost none. Again, it is more realistic for Indonesian writers to think of how they can be read by 280 million Indonesian people. And that may be more complicated than gaining readership in the international level. Why? Because the challenge now is coming from technology that encourages people to enjoy anything visually rather than reading. Yes, we have many new writers and literary books. The problem is, do people still read books? Any kind of book, it does not have to be literature. Or are we already one hundred percent into the visual in consuming information? As a result, we now have fanfiction, we have wattpad.com. Writers can readily utilize technology to create, distribute, and promote their works and gain a much wider readership. They use code-mixing, code-switching, sometimes most of the words and expressions are in English, and they also use existing popular characters from comics, Hollywood movies, or Korean drama in any way they like.

In fanfiction, Wonder Woman could meet with a Korean K-pop star, and together they go on an adventure. Fanfiction is really sophisticated. Its progenitors have websites promoting the genre. Beautiful cover designs, great marketing. They feature age rating as well: "This is appropriate for eighteen years old," or so on. They mention the collaborators and the whole creative team, too. It is like promoting a movie. When one opens the website, one can see that it is professionally managed. They do not claim originality but rather imitate outright from other areas of artistic production or use characters from real life, Hollywood or Korean movies, Netflix, and so on. What is the impact? If you are a fan of BTS and find out that one or two of the members are characters in one of those books, then you will be curious to find out what is happening with your favorite K-pop celebrities. Why are they in that book? What happens to them in the end? The impact is so successful, even more so than the works of established authors who do not want to use the digital platform to promote their books and still opt to rely on Gramedia. These are all young people who are adept at incorporating technology into their creative production of the fanfiction phenomenon, which is huge now.Let me go back to soft power. If you look at YouTube, you will notice artists like guitarists, drummers, and singers who are not engaged in any commercialized industry. They post their own artistic activities and performances on YouTube channels, which gain

millions of viewers and followers. People from different parts of the world now see Southeast Asia as crazy. Who would have thought that from there will come singers and artists who are as good as Celine Dion, better than the Scorpions or the Beatles, and so on? This is soft power, more concrete than literature whose authors still have issues with the use of technology to promote themselves as far and wide as possible. Technology can pave the way for transforming practices, genre, and the mentality of the whole ecosystem. Then, one will be able to gain international recognition and initiate regional collaborations through digital platforms.

With regards to the current trend of orality, in what way does it differ from Walter Ong's definition? It is a kind of orality located in a unique situation. The situation is we are not done yet with literacy rate problems in Indonesia. Students cannot be persuaded to read in class. Then, digital technology comes, and all of a sudden, people switch to a more visual way of getting information. Yet, as digital technology and digital literacy come into play, orality unexpectedly gains a new breath. These are the circumstances created by the advent of digital technology. It actually helps writers who still hang on orality to survive rather than to fade away.

LUNA SICAT CLETO: There is this burden of using the nation in novel writing. In recent years, we have begun to venture away from that template or that cage where other avenues are explored. Ramon Guillermo has written *Makina ni Mang Turing*, which theorizes some other avenue. He uses the traditional game of *sungka* to talk about other things other than the burden of the nation concept. May I know if there are invisible narratives that are yet to be told because from our context? We are abundant with tales of woe about poverty, about displacement, about workers dying, for example, or domestic workers being abused, or Filipino women being raped. So, there's all this talk about oppression and the decay of the moral firmament. In the new writing that you are talking about, the shift into the digital and to other avenues, are those topics still talked about? Do we have something in common in terms of tackling that moral firmament decay? I am asking this because I stumbled upon a poem written by Taufiq Ismail, and it is about being ashamed of being Indonesian. And there's this long part where he itemizes some commonalities a Filipino citizen would really agree with. For example, in my land, corruption in bureaucracy has a world class rating: number one. Those kinds of things. So we can absolutely relate

to that. But we want to know if there's an upper level, an upper kind of discourse toward this kind of addressing the issue.

RAMON GUILLERMO: Can I add something to Luna's question? Because in the Philippines, another point of contrast … and the term national literature is such an important, debated, and disputed idea. In Indonesia, is there still a place for that notion, not *sastra* national or national literature? And if that's the case, what could it possibly mean in Indonesia given the developments you have been talking about?

MANNEKE BUDIMAN: Let me start with Luna. All the issues mentioned in Philippine literature occur as well in Indonesia. Name any social issue, and you will be able to find writers who write about them. One thing that is invisible in all these is a world where writers do not really write about or never touch even in the present day. For example, what does the future say for us from the perspective of the present? Writing about the past, a lot has been going on in this area: rewriting history. But I don't really find any vision about the future in their aesthetics. The future of Indonesian-ness, the future of Indonesia, that is something that I do not see yet. I do not know why nobody writes or speculates about it in literature. That is something that I need to explore later. The future seems so dreadful or totally dark that one does not want to say anything about it. Either one gets trapped in the present with contemporary issues or tries to go back to the past in order to understand it in a different way. What is missing is the future. I think a topic that is not in anybody's work is futurist fiction; but the rest, like the abuse of migrant workers, domestic rape, corruption, they are all there. Everybody has their own interest: Christians will respond strongly to different moral and social issues that touch their Christian values. The Hindus are doing the same thing in Bali. It is not the monopoly of the Islamists anymore nowadays.I'm trying to connect this with the problem of national literature as a theme that does not go away. We don't talk about it anymore. It is very surprising that, after the Reformasi, we no longer hear speeches or discourses about *identitas nasional*, *kepribadian nasional*. Talks about *bahasa nasional* are still circulating every now and then, especially every time we celebrate the 28th of October, with all things related to the Youth's Oath and discussions about national language. But if you try to read people's thoughts about the national language, you will see a very progressive and revolutionary outlook. It is not about keeping or

preserving the national language in order to keep it alive but how to help the national language be valid and adaptive to the international world. That is the tone now. We do not talk about the national in the same way as before. And for many literary writers, it is no longer relevant to talk about it. National themes are no longer relevant. If you do not agree, you have to tell me. But that's my position and observation. Nobody writes about anything national anymore.

ARIEL LOPEZ: Yes, on the issues of sastra nasional. I mean, of course, and in the Philippines, we have national artists for literature. In Indonesia, correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think there's a *sastrawan nasional*? There is just nothing like that. But of course, you have different, many *pahlawan nasional*, right?

MANNEKE BUDIMAN: Yes.

ARIEL LOPEZ: Do you think it would be helpful to have that distinction, national, bestowed by the state—i.e., to have a sastrawan nasional? We have it in the Philippines.

MANNEKE BUDIMAN: It's a totally different concept of sastrawan nasional if you compare it with Malaysia or Brunei. Sastrawan nasional … there is a poet laureate supported by the state and receives subsidy and all kinds of facilities from the state. A sastrawan nasional in Indonesia receives a certificate and probably only a certain amount of money. It is more like a tokenism rather than something believed as truly important. It is only this year [2022] that we've had this new kind of award called Sastrawan Nasional. If you look at it, it does not mean anything. It is basically an award given to an author who has proven to having a lifetime commitment toward the development and advancement of Indonesian literature. No young authors will be able to receive it because a long, impressive track record is required. It is more like a lifetime achievement award. It does not have the same weight perhaps as in Malaysia, Brunei, or even in the Philippines.

We do not exactly know where Indonesian literature is heading to, but I have to be optimistic with the diversity, with this genuine concern that authors now have knowledge, concern, and interest in a whole range of social issues. In the past, we did not really see that. But now, it seems to

be everybody's concern if you are within the literary circle in this country. And for that reason, we can expect some good things to come out in the future.

RAMON GUILLERMO: I would like to thank our main speaker, Professor Budiman. And our reactors. I do not think I can really summarize what we talked about because it was really so vast and so various. But I think we are starting some kind of important conversation. I think the questions that were raised by our reactors have to be followed up and [we have to] deepen the answers to them by deepening our knowledge of Indonesian society, literature, and culture.