

Utopian Identities, Real Selves

Whereas most of the voluminous critical discussion of 'postcolonialism' and literature has concentrated on issues of 'writing back' in colonial situations and in European languages to empires past and present, the focus of the IIAS workshop 'Chewing the West' was on indigenous literatures and the broader issue of the multiple ways in which not only Western literary genres, but also non-Western modern identities have been configured in literature outside the West.*

Report >
General

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By Tony Day

The workshop's very conceptualization promised a shift from a narrow concern with the legacies of colonialism, which, as many commentators have observed, has tended to reinforce the very dominance of European languages and literatures that indigenous authors and post-colonial scholars are contesting. If the presenters effectively 'provincialized' and localized the dominant West, they also indicated that much remains to be done, through the study of literary forms themselves, before we understand how the worldwide processes of literary creation occur and lead to the emergence of 'world literature'. Particularly fascinating were the hints of a tension between utopian possibilities for identity conveyed through literary forms, whether 'Western' or 'indigenous', and the 'real' selves, whether in the guise of characters or authorial personae, conveyed by the literary text. The tension between idealized past or future identities and real selfhood in the present has less to do with the formation of the nation state than with the creation of literary selves. Readers around the world can recognize the latter in their own actual everyday, modern contexts (for several stimulating definitions of realism and the self in literature, see Karatani 1993, Makdisi 2000 and Zhao 1995).

Thus, according to Daniela Merolla (Leiden University), a real self emerges in modern Berber Kabyle literature that is distinct from those portrayed in either French ethnographic, Berber folkloric, or official (classical) Arabic linguistic terms. According to Thomas de Bruijn (Leiden University), Premchand's Hindi short story, *Kafan*, effectively presents India's economic and social realities in the 1930s not through Western techniques of narrative and psychological realism,

but by using older, indigenous rhetorical forms. Madhava and Ghisu acquire a selfhood which late-colonial Hindi readers could recognize as similar to their own through forms of characterization that derive from traditional ideas about possibilities for individuality and freedom. One such possibility occurs in the last stage of human existence, the 'sphere of renunciation', which is governed by the dominant emotional state (*rasa*) of 'the gruesome'. Another is embodied in the archetype of the saintly drunk. The self thus brought to life in the story is poised between the utopian promise of social customs and beliefs that offer an all-encompassing meaning to and release from life's suffering, and the paradoxical realization that, as Ghisu observes, 'someone who did not get a rag to cover her body when she was alive, needs a new shroud when she dies'. The story argues against any realistic hope of either a utopian modern future or a return to an idealized traditional past by means of a rhetoric saturated with Hindu religious idealism.

Merolla and De Bruijn, as well Kwadwo Osei-Nyame, Jr (University of London), Evan Mwangi (University of Nairobi), and Said A.M. Khamis (University of Bayreuth) in their essays on African literatures, do not present national identities as unitary but, rather, as multiple, layered, and gendered. The complex reality of war in Vietnam as portrayed in Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* (1991) cannot be reduced to the heroic, ideal male stereotypes of Communist Party slogans, as Ursula Lies (University of Potsdam) demonstrates in her analysis. Yet that novel also conjures up a timeless, utopian kind of national identity that transcends the limits imposed by national boundaries, state doctrines, or gender differences. The role of the Sherlock Holmes-like detectives in the 1930s Sumatran novels discussed by Doris Jedamski (workshop convenor) is similarly utopian, not only as an idealized 'manifestation of modern rationality and subjectivity', as she puts it, or as a representation of the quintessential Javanese nobleman brought back to life in the late colonial Dutch East Indies, but also as an endorsement of a desired, future state of absolute law and order. As represented in the

Indonesian detective figure, the 'real' self is concealed behind the mysterious masks of a paternalistic superman who only ambiguously represents either the independent modern self or the national citizen. This is reminiscent of Franco Moretti's and Umberto Eco's claims that the detective fiction genre in the West negates individualism and freedom in the interest of promoting a paternalistic kind of social order (Moretti 1983; Eco 1979). As Moretti notes, detective fiction invokes science for defensive rather than developmental purposes, for it reinstates 'an idea of *status society* that is externalized, traditionalist, and easily controllable' (Moretti 1983: 145, italics in the original). The fetishist preoccupation with outward appearances and the hyperphysical details of the modernized colonial world, as noted by both Matthew Cohen (University of Glasgow) and Keith Foulcher (University of Sydney) in their papers on theatre and the novel in early twentieth-century Java respectively, may also convey a similarly ambiguous message: the tension between a 'real' national or modern self in the colonial present and a protean world of hypothetical, utopian identities without limit or possibility of attainment. ◀

References

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* Foulcher and Day, *Clearing a Space: Postcolonial Readings of Modern Indonesian Literature*, Leiden: KITLV Press (2002), p. 2, n.1

Anthropological Futures

Report >
Southeast Asia

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Following 32 years of Suharto's New Order rule in Indonesia, the startling, occasionally marvellous, and all too often frightening developments of the last four years of Reformasi and its aftermath challenge us as scholars to consider the political-historical conjunctures in which we work and to think anew the ethnographic contexts of which we write. The nagging sense of crisis across the archipelago (with varied manifestations in different places), the recurrent political turmoil and communal violence, the novel experiments with democracy, civil institutions, and forms of publicity, the stubborn persistence of powerful forces opposed to change, the processes and by-products of decentralization, and, last but not least, the diverse negotiations by Indonesians of their positions within a post-9/11 global world order, all demand our urgent attention. The exploratory conference 'Anthropological futures for twenty-first-century Indonesia' was convened with these interrelated purposes in mind.

By Patricia Spyer

Among other issues raised, the conference convenor addressed the need for new research agendas that can better address the complex social dynamics and political processes characterizing Indonesia since Suharto's step-down. Are the same intellectual paradigms employed in research carried out under New Order conditions equally valid today, or did 'the appearance of order' – in John Pemberton's felicitous formulation (Pemberton 1994) – put in place by the Suharto regime cause us to look in some directions and not others? Has a new set of complex problems emerged which have only now become accessible?

Along with the refiguring of unfolding circumstances, the legacy of the Suharto era and, equally important, that

of the scholarship of the New Order can be explored from new perspectives. Amongst other issues, conference participants were invited to consider, in retrospect, the ramifications of legal restrictions and policies of the New

Order with respect to media and labour as well as the impact of the regime's cultural politics *vis-à-vis* religion, ethnicity, and gender. The bankruptcy of the former regime's historiography, the silences covering the massacres of

1965-66 and the New Order's human rights record, and the relative paucity of scholarship regarding Islam and the country's ethnic Chinese, seem especially worthy of reconsideration. Issues of globalization and the nation state's redeployment within an increasingly heterogeneous world are matters of concern together with, more specifically, current revisions of the nation state project and related issues of sovereignty, regional autonomy, and historical and political revisionisms. Amongst these more volatile issues, participants were asked to consider the kinds of imaginings, experiences, and ordinary and extraordinary events that have come to characterize the everyday across Indonesia since 1998.

Besides an afternoon of film-screenings by Garin Nugroho and Arjo Danusiri, introduced by the latter, an ethnographic filmmaker from Jakarta, the conference featured six speakers who engaged the issue of Indonesian and anthropological 'futures' in a range of compelling ways. Thinking about and imagining the future involved a detour through the past (Keane, Steedly), an engagement with the shifting temporalities woven through women's life cycles of work as well as with the subjective narrative of this variable experience (Saptari), a consideration of the conditions as well as possible outcomes to be pursued in the aftermath of violence (Laksono, Manuhutu), and the problem of 'making the future' through a process of 'decolonizing' the disavowed national historiography of the New Order (Henk Schulte Nordholt).

A focus of discussion was how thinking about the future necessarily implies a vantage point with respect to which not only the future – or a range of possible or alternative futures – come into view but also particular perspectives on the present and past as well. Imagining the future, in Indonesia – as elsewhere – means being cognizant of the possibilities alive at any given moment, compels the exploration of the different temporalities and positions that people

Two films

were screened at the conference. *Maiden of the Morning Star*, an episode on Papua from the TV docudrama series *Library of the Children of the Archipelago*, focuses on expectations for the future in this frontier of the Indonesia nation state as seen through the eyes of a young Papuan schoolgirl. *Viva Indonesia: Letters to God*, a compilation of four produced as part of the 'Visual House of Papua' project, addresses the pervasive Indonesian stereotyping of Papuans, ethnic tensions, local ambitions of independence, and the Indonesian school curriculum, specifically the teaching of national history. The film features five children across the archipelago who, confronted with crisis in their post-New Order lives, each write to God asking him to intervene in their own particular troubling circumstances.

Presentations were given by Webb Keane, P.M. Laksono, Wim Manuhutu, Ratna Saptari, Henk Schulte Nordholt, and Mary Steedly. Discussants were Kees van Dijk, Frans Hüsken, Nico Schulte Nordholt, Fridus Steijlen, Heather Sutherland, and Leontine Visser. The CNWS Research School and the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences at Leiden University, the KITLV Vereniging, IIAS, the Royal Dutch Academy funded project 'Indonesian Mediations,' the National Museum of Ethnology, and WOTRO/NWO all provided valuable conference support.