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## **The Modern Library of Indonesia: Home of the “Classics?”**

**Pamela Allen**

While it is now generally unfashionable to speak of a literary “canon,” when a translator comes to selecting works for translation into another language, that process inevitably involves making judgements about what is good literature and writing, which often then leads to the kind of ranking that is the basis of canon-making. It is a process that was faced by Lontar, the Jakarta-based foundation and publishing house, when, in the Modern Library of Indonesia project headed up by John McGlynn, it set itself the goal of both “preserving nearly-forgotten classics of Indonesian literature” and presenting them, often for the first time in English, to an international audience. Books in the Library range from titles such as the 1922 classic *Sitti Nurbaya* by Marah Rusli (trans. by George A. Fowler), a powerful depiction of the tension between tradition and modernity in

the East Indies, to Leila S. Chudori's 2012 novel *Home* (trans. by John McGlynn), a story about the tragedy of political exiles during Suharto's regime (1965-1998) who were forced out of Indonesia after the 1965 massacre of presumed leftists and sympathisers.

Not everyone will agree with the books selected so far—and those that will be selected in the future—but there's no doubt that most contemporary Indonesian writers would like to see their work included in that Library. Dewi Lestari, for example, as quoted by Alison Kroulek in her blog (The Language Blog), called the English translation (by Harry Aveling) of her 2001 novel *Supernova* a “dream come true,” adding that the lack of a translation had made it more difficult for her to progress in her writing career.

For me, a long-time scholar and translator of Indonesian literature, seeing the library of translated “classics” on my bookshelf, neat brown spines all in a row, never fails to give me a thrill. But how many other readers have those volumes on their bookshelf? While Lontar has produced, and continues to produce, an exciting library of

translated literature, the invisibility of translated literature from Indonesia is often remarked upon.

As Ron Witton reminds us in his review of the Modern Library in *Inside Indonesia* (28 September 2015), until the flurry of translation activity leading up to Indonesia being Guest of Honour at the 2015 Frankfurt Book Fair, translations of Indonesian literature were relatively rare. This has created the (erroneous) perception that Indonesia doesn't produce good fiction. For example, as reported in *The Jakarta Globe*, the high-profile Indonesian writer Putu Wijaya—whose 1973 novel *Telegram* (translated by Stephen Epstein) is included in the Modern Library series—related that in 1985 “[a]n American man approached me and asked if I was from the Philippines. When I said I was from Indonesia, he was surprised and said he didn't know there were writers in Indonesia.”

## **Engaged Literature**

A number of factors may have contributed to this relative invisibility of Indonesian literature and to the apparent dearth of translations. One of those factors, I would argue,

is the orientation and purpose of serious literature in Indonesia. Ever since the “beginning” of modern Indonesian literature in the early twentieth century, Indonesian writers have engaged with the project of creating and defining Indonesian identity, an endeavour that developed out of the nationalist movement. Literature has come to be understood as not merely a product for consumption and entertainment, but as a significant part of the project of nation building. Most serious fiction writers have therefore engaged both with the mission of creating a new literature, and with the interrogation of issues of national identity. This trend continues to inform Indonesian literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a result, Indonesian literature is very much—and unapologetically—a literature of and about Indonesia. While as an academic I delighted in this fact, using novels, short stories and even poetry as texts from which my students could learn about the country, its history and its struggles, a reader coming “cold” to one of those same works in translation may feel that they have pitched up mid-conversation, that they need to go away and learn about Indonesia before embarking on

the story in question. This is not necessarily a bad thing, of course, and many people have told me that they have done just that, but it means that a full appreciation of many literary works from Indonesia is in some ways contingent upon an understanding of socio-political context.

In order to fully grasp the significance of Mochtar Lubis's 1963 novel *Twilight in Jakarta* (trans. by Claire Holt), for example, which depicts the moral decay of Indonesian society from 1945 to 1967 under the charismatic yet deeply flawed President Sukarno, the reader needs the kind of contextual background provided by David Hill in the introduction to the Modern Library revised translation. But even that six-page introduction can only touch the surface of the extraordinarily complex socio-political issues faced by Sukarno and his people at the time. Mochtar Lubis, too, was a complex character, and much of that complexity is transferred to the pages of the novel. Can a reader who knows little about Sukarno's Indonesia and even less about Mochtar Lubis read this novel in the same way as an Indonesian or a student of Indonesia reads it? (Of course, one might add, does it matter?)

The corollary of this is that, by and large, Indonesian writers write with an Indonesian audience in mind, any desire to be translated into English or other languages notwithstanding. The tension, then, between writing for, of and about Indonesia (with all the assumed knowledge that goes with it) and the desire to be read by an international audience has contributed, I think, to the difficulty Indonesian literature has faced in getting traction in the English-speaking world. While I have great sympathy for Lawrence Venuti's perspective, outlined in his 2008 book *The Translator's Invisibility*, that "a translated text should be the site where a reader gets some sense of a cultural other," for many readers that "cultural otherness" is too confronting, too complex or just plain too hard.

However, there is mounting evidence that translations of Indonesian literature are being recognised outside Indonesia and the immediate region. Putu Oka Sukanta's collection of stories *Lies, Loss, and Longing* (translated by Vern Cork, Leslie Dwyer, Keith Foulcher, John McGlynn and Mary Zurbuchen), which is included in the Modern Library collection, along with Afrizal Malna's poetry

anthology *Anxiety Myths* (translated by Andy Fuller), were included on *World Literature Today's* list of 75 Notable Translations of 2014. In 2015 that list included Leila S. Chudori's novel *Home* and Annie Tucker's translation of Eka Kurniawan's novel *Beauty is a Wound*. (Eka's novel has also been translated into more than 30 other languages.)

There can be no denying that Eka Kurniawan is Indonesia's most recent literary sensation. *Beauty is a Wound* has had a significant international impact and won a swathe of literary awards in 2015. This was followed up by his second novel *Man Tiger* (translated by Labodalih Sembiring) being long-listed for the Man Booker International Prize, the first Indonesian literary work to be awarded that honour. Comparisons have been made between *Man Tiger*, whose main character is possessed by the spirit of a white tiger, and the magic realism of Latin American writers like Gabriel García Márquez.

But for Eka the road to international recognition was a long one: 14 years between his novels' publication in Indonesian and their English translations. As Eka told Dene

Mullen in a January 2017 interview for *Southeast Asian Globe*, “Indonesian literature is kind of obscure in, say, a global literary scene, so it’s not easy.” In some ways, the popularity of *Beauty is a Wound* came as a surprise to scholars of Indonesian literature, not because of any flaws in the quality of the writing or the translation, but precisely because of the issue I raised above, the fact that this novel is deeply embedded in Indonesian history and local mythology. The commercial success of *Beauty is a Wound* comes back, perhaps, to the multiple layers of meaning in the novel. To one reader it is a highly symbolic retelling of Indonesia’s colonial past, to another it is a flight of surrealist fancy, to yet another it is a poignant love story. Is one reader’s story more valid than another’s? Does the fact this novel is not wedded to a realist depiction explain the way it has leapt the cultural divide between its original and its translation?

### **Colonial Legacy**

Some, including John McGlynn, have commented on Indonesia’s colonial legacy as a contributing factor in the relative invisibility of Indonesian literature, and the

difficulties of establishing a market for translation. Authors from the former colonies of France and England, for example, can command the attention of large French or British publishers. Big publishing houses such as Heinemann and Penguin have translated and published authors from India, Kenya, Senegal, Egypt and Morocco. By contrast, Dutch publishers rarely publish literary works from their former colonies, including Indonesia. John McGlynn points out that hardly any foreign publishers will publish translations of anything other than bestselling or award-winning novels, unless there is a considerable financial incentive.

### **Death of Translators**

Perhaps the largest problem faced by Indonesian authors seeking exposure abroad is that the general standard of literary translation in Indonesia is very low. John McGlynn says, "A high level in the quality of translation is and will always be the single most important factor in Indonesia's success as a source of international-quality literature."

McGlynn says that while he has worked with more than 250 translators over the years, and while many had the

potential to become good translators, fewer than a dozen could be counted on to produce literary-quality translations without drastic editing measures.

Relatively few people in the English-speaking world have learned Indonesian, and even fewer to the standard required to be a competent translator. There is a certain poignancy in the comment by the Indonesian writer Ratih Kumala, quoted by Dene Mullen, that “Indonesia is a small country in the world, and nobody knows the Indonesian language unless you have lived here for a long time.”

Within Indonesia, concerted support for the creative industries—and this includes translator training schemes—is sorely lacking. The Indonesian author Sonia Piscayanti, who runs her own independent publishing company (Mahima Institute Indonesia), told Dene Mullen, “First, governments should think that literature is important. If you don’t think that literature is important, nothing will be done. Second, writers are important, and third, translators are important.” John McGlynn maintains that the government can take two tangible steps to promote

Indonesian literature: set up a committed and long-term program to fund translation, and ensure Indonesia is represented at overseas literary festivals and book fairs. The latter is prohibitively expensive for most Indonesian publishers and authors.

### **Achieving the Status of a “Modern Classic”**

Indonesian writers are almost unanimous in their desire to have their work translated into other languages, in particular English. As Dewi Lestari told *The Jakarta Globe*, “In the past, I have been invited to some writers’ festivals abroad. The participants always seemed very interested in my presentation, but when they asked me, ‘Where can I get your book?’ I always had to say that there wasn’t an English language translation yet.” In the same interview, Ratih Kumala, whose novel has been translated into English by Annie Tucker as *Cigarette Girl*, said, “I think it’s very important [to be translated] because there aren’t many potential Indonesian readers compared to those who read in English.”

Commenting on the aims of the Modern Library project, John McGlynn says, “With this series, readers abroad can get to know [Indonesian] writers, and through their books, Indonesian history from the days of pre-independence to the present.” There is no doubt that the establishment of the Modern Library is a very important step in bringing Indonesian literature to the world. Whether inclusion in the Library automatically confers “classic” status on a literary work is another matter, and arguably not the most important one.

Conversely, the non-inclusion of a translated work in the Modern Library series is not an indicator that that work is not potentially a “classic.” (One might ask whether Eka Kurniawan’s *Beauty is a Wound* is a “classic”.) Lontar faced significant practical challenges in its aim to capture some of the titles it deemed to be “classic.” The fact that the work of Pramoedya Ananta Toer—probably Indonesia’s best-known writer—is not included in the Library, for example, has nothing to do with its literary quality, but relates to legal matters.

When I asked John McGlynn which titles he wishes he could have included in the Modern Library, he nominated the poetry of the eminent pre-war poet Amir Hamzah, whose poems, with their multiple layers of meaning, are exceedingly difficult to translate; a translator would need to have a deep knowledge of Sufi mysticism, classical Malay poetry and Dutch/European poetic forms as well as the Indonesian language. Another gap identified by McGlynn is the Indies-Dutch novel *Buiten het Gareel* by Soewarsih Djojopoespito, a very important work not only because it is one of the few novels by a woman written before independence, but also because of its depiction of the nationalist movement and Indonesia's "awakening."

For my part, when I run my fingers over the fine brown spines of the Modern Indonesian Library on my bookshelf, notions of the "canon" or "classics" cease to be relevant. I simply rejoice in the availability in English of these wonderful works of literature, all of which, in their original Indonesian, have been part of my literary consciousness since I began learning the language more than 40 years ago.

# The Loneliness of the Indonesian Translator

## Harry Aveling

My aunt, a staunch Anglican all her life, gave me a map of Borneo when I was eight years old. She may have hoped that I would be a missionary. When I went up to the University of Sydney in 1959, my intention was to become a high school teacher of English and History (and not a missionary). Towards the end of that first year, our History class received a visit from the lecturer in Malay, Dr A.H. Hill, who talked about a new programme in Indonesian and Malayan Studies. I remember his presentation, complete with batik cloths and wayang puppets. Indonesian and Malayan Studies seemed a fascinating new area to explore and I enrolled the next year. That was followed by enrolment in the Master's degree and, much later, in doctoral studies at the National University of Singapore.

Helen Waddell has famously observed in her wonderful book, *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics*: "One cannot say 'I will translate', any more than one can say 'I will compose poetry.' In this minor art also, the wind blows where it lists." I willingly became a translator of Indonesian and Malay literature in the early 1970s while I was teaching in Penang at the Science University of Malaysia. In a few years, I published Rendra's *Ballads and Blues* (with Burton Raffel, 1974); *Contemporary Indonesian Poetry* (1975); Iwan Simatupang's *The Pilgrim* (1975), which received the first ASEAN Literary Award for

the Novel in 1977; and two books by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *The Fugitive* (1975) and *A Heap of Ashes* (1975). One strong motivating force was the desire to show my fellow Australians how Indonesia looked from the inside and thus hopefully create some empathy for our nearest neighbour about whom we knew very little and of whom we were rather frightened. To that point in time, the few works translated into English were either of poor literary quality or directed against the political authoritarianism of the Sukarno era. The translations of Pramoedya's works were my own protest against his imprisonment as a political dissident under the new Suharto regime.

I have continued to translate Indonesian and Malay literature ever since. My friend and colleague, Burton Raffel, has been quoted as saying: "In 2009, I can still say, without fear of arrogance or correction, that I'm the best professional translator of Indonesian poetry. But I'm also the worst because I'm the only one." In 2009, Burton wasn't "the only one." Neither was I. But it often felt like it. I translated alone and without the company of other translators. To compensate, I subscribed to literary magazines (*Times Literary Supplement* and the *New York Review of Books*), bought books the journals suggested (including A.K. Ramanujan's *The Interior Landscape*, which showed me how to translate poetry), joined translators' societies (the American Literary Translators Association, Malaysian Translators Association), made good use of available libraries (I was amazed to find a book composed entirely of prefaces

compiled by someone who had spent his whole life translating William Faulkner) and travelled to conferences. Because I was in the region, I was also able to travel regularly to Indonesia and establish important friendships with many Indonesian authors. (Young translators are well advised to work with newly emerging authors as a way of benefitting both parties.) The part I least liked about being an isolated translator was that there was often a lot of opposition to my translations, particularly from critics who knew Indonesian well but had little appreciation of the subtleties of English. I had no one to sympathise with me and found the criticism difficult to deal with.

James Holmes has pointed out that many things are required for success as a translator: “acumen as a critic, craftsmanship as a poet, and skill in the analysing and resolving of a confrontation of norms and conventions across linguistic and cultural barriers.” Perhaps most of all, however, one needs good publishers. Partly from principle, and partly because of a lack of interest in the wider English speaking world, I have mainly published in the region of South and Southeast Asia, where the texts came from, and not relied on the self-serving prestige of the powerful Western nations. My Indonesian and Malay translations have been published and read mainly in those countries. My translations from Francophone Vietnamese have been published and read in Hanoi. My collaborative translations from Hindi of the eighteenth-century devotional poets Charandas, Sahajo Bai and Daya Bai have been published and read in India.

Unfortunately this sometimes makes it hard to know where one's work is or what is happening to it. "You are our gateway to Indonesia," someone once told me in the Philippines. None of my books have been published there, so I can only infer that photocopies had been circulated.

The University of Queensland Press, Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) and the Kuala Lumpur branch of Oxford University Press were all keen to publish translations of Southeast Asian literature throughout the 1970s. Then, in the mid-1980s, all apparently lost interest in the project. Perhaps the series they promoted were not financially viable. Today there is no publisher committed to publishing any substantial amount of Indonesian and Malay literature in translation for Europe and America, except for Lontar. Lontar has been of inestimable value to the wider appreciation of Indonesia and its literature.

In fact, no publisher in Southeast Asia that I know of—except Silkworm Books in Chiang Mai, Thailand—even publishes literature from outside its own national borders. Interest in, and support for, Indonesian literature in translation often begins and ends in Indonesia itself. English readers outside Indonesia are not looking for works that Indonesians consider good but, rather, they want works of translated literature that fit within the stereotypes and frames of reference of their own literary habits. Pramoedya Ananta Toer aroused interest as a political prisoner and Noble Prize nominee for

literature, and came to be appreciated as “the Solzhenitsyn of Indonesia.” The more contemporary writer Eka Kurniawan is perceived as a writer of “magical realism” and also, like Pramoedya, the chronicler of Indonesian history. “Third world literature” is somehow “allegorical”, as Frederic Jameson argues in his notorious article on “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism;” it is about nations and not about real people.

Without any comparative background it is also impossible to contextualise works. In Indonesia, Eka’s best known works date from a decade earlier than his emergence on the international stage, and are compared there unfavourably with other writers such as Danarto and Hamsad Rangkuti. But there is no interest outside Indonesia for these two authors and, naturally, no sense of what they have achieved. (Hamsad’s works are given away free of charge by Amazon from time to time, without any one ever taking up the offer)

In publishing alone, one runs certain economic risks. Some half a dozen of my Malay translations were republished by a second publisher in Kuala Lumpur without notifying me. My collaborative translation from Hindi of Osho Rajneesh’s talks on the eighteenth-century devotional poet Daya Bai, *The Last Morning Star*, was republished by a commercial publisher in Bombay without including my name and that of my colleague. We had been described as “editors” on the Rajneesh Foundation edition of the book, as though Osho spoke in English and we had just presented it verbatim, and the

new publisher presumably thought their editors were better than his.

Operating alone also carries certain political risks. I was briefly banned from entry to Indonesia in 1996, in part because of my translations of Pramoedya Ananta Toer. It was perhaps a professional hazard at the time; not to have been banned, in fact, potentially meant that one was naive about the complexity of life under the late New Order. On my return to Australia I sought diplomatic assistance from the Indonesian Embassy in Canberra (coincidentally I had just examined the MA thesis of the Ambassador's son) and was allowed back to Indonesia for a period of exactly fourteen days. Nevertheless, being banned prepared me for the anthology *Secrets Need Words: Indonesian Poetry 1966-1998* (2001, Ohio University Press), an anthology reflecting the ambiguity and complexity of literary responses to the oppressiveness of the "New Order" government.

Translation is both a deeply satisfying and a deeply frustrating activity, a no-win game. There are too many conflicting expectations about translations as faithful copies of the original source text and culture, and translations as works of literature in their own right. Let me quote from Burton Raffel again:

A translator, and above all a translator from a ...  
little-known language, does not translate for

those who already know the language, those who can savour the original's ways just as they have come down to us. Nor are his or her responsibilities conditioned by the existence of such fortunate people. His or her job is to interest and to educate, to please and to inform, the modern reader who knows not a word of the original tongue.

This is another sort of missionary work entirely.

Despite the criticism, thinking what I was doing was important for the wider understanding of Indonesia, I have kept on translating. Perhaps I am a better translator these days, perhaps I have lived longer than my enemies. I certainly learnt some humility in 2002 when I visited England to attend a conference on translation at SOAS. The immigration officer asked me why I was coming to England. I told her about the conference and added that I was giving a paper on "Mistakes in Translation." Remembering how many mistakes I had been accused of over the years, I explained: "I'm a bit of an expert in the subject, you know." She looked at me in a very British way and replied, "Now, sir, we mustn't boast, must we?" I'm still not sure whether she was teasing me or scolding me. Loneliness is part of the burden carried by isolated translators in distant countries dealing with "little-known" languages, "minor" literatures (if the main

language and literature of a nation of 268 million people can be categorized in these terms) and unfamiliar cultures. Good intentions and speaking the same language don't necessarily help—at home or abroad.

# **The View from Indonesia**

**John H. McGlynn**

## **Language = Power**

As with commercial trade, there should be, in the world of ideas, a two-way current with an equitable balance in the flow from one country to the other. Such is not the case in the world of translation where language and power are often synonymous and, today, where the English language exercises nearly global hegemonic rule, the number of translations being published in English is tiny when compared with translations from English into other languages. In the case of Indonesia, the fourth most populous country in the world, more than 40% of the 45,000+ titles published annually are translations—most of them from English, even those titles that were originally published in languages other than English. No two way current there! I do not despair that Indonesia is the recipient of a horde of content from abroad—Indonesia has long absorbed and put to good use many of the more beneficial ideas that have originated elsewhere (as well as

some of the bad!)—but that in the West or, more specifically, the English speaking West, there appears to be in place a floodgate that greatly restricts the flow of ideas in that direction.

At this point in time, would it be possible to turn this situation around, to raise the floodgates in the English speaking world in order to allow the more rapid flow of ideas and content from outside? Having spent most of my adult life in a steeply upward climb to promote Indonesian literature in translation the pessimist in me says “Not likely!” but, at the same time, I argue with my discontent self, something must be done to right this situation, not just in Indonesia but elsewhere in the world. I explore the Indonesia-case below.

### **Stepping Back in Time**

To better understand why Indonesian content has been so slow in finding acceptance in the West, it is necessary to step back in time. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to shunt aside the oft-proffered view that “Indonesian” is a new language and that because there was no country called

Indonesia prior to the end of World War II, there was no Indonesian literature prior to the country's independence and, thus, very little to translate.

The fact is that "Indonesian" is a merely a political term, adopted as a tool by young nationalists from around the Indonesian archipelago in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in their advocacy for an independent nation. This is something rebels in the 18<sup>th</sup> century United States might have done when advocating for a free nation, declaring that the English spoken in the United States was henceforth to be called "American." Had they, would this have meant that American literature no longer had its roots in English? Obviously not. Likewise, and despite the term, Indonesian is Malay whose literary roots go back to at least the 7<sup>th</sup> century. As mentioned earlier, however, language is power, and because of forced colonization by the Dutch for several hundred years, the region now known as Indonesia was prevented from disseminating its language and culture to other countries. Further, while there was a lingua franca, i.e., Malay, Malay was not the language of power and thus it was the Dutch who determined what information was

conveyed outside the region's borders. In that instance, no emphasis was given to the translation of local literature or wisdom. Even in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Dutch belatedly began to provide education for a small number of indigenous people, no effort was put into the translation of indigenous masterpieces into Dutch. And, thus, when Indonesia did gain its independence after World War II, it was globally viewed as a country with a clean slate of culture.

Indonesia has often been referred to as an imagined nation—and it is!—but what nation is not? Where can one find in today's world a country whose borders have not been defined by political (and militaristic) power and whose people are of one blood line, speaking a common language, and living by a uniform code. In this sense, Indonesia is much less imaginary than others, especially immigrant nations like the countries of North and South America, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere, because long before there was an Indonesia there was the Malay language that unified the polyglot of indigenous peoples and was both the language of trade and knowledge.

## Single Fighters

The history of Indonesian literature in translation between the time of independence in 1945 and the late 1980s is that of single fighters, individual translators who had an eye for knowing what content should be translated but whose work was largely unappreciated outside the Indonesianist circles.

The first attempt to introduce Indonesia to the world through literary translation was marked by the publication of *The Flaming Earth*, a small one-off collection of poetry released by Friends of the Indonesian People in 1949. In the 1950s, Cornell University in New York State became the centre for Indonesian studies in the United States and through its “Modern Indonesia Project” under the guidance of John M. Echols published the much larger *Indonesian Writing in Translation*. Echols also published the first major Indonesian-English dictionary. Through the journal *Indonesia*, published at Cornell, a small stream of Indonesian short stories and poetry began to appear in English.

It was not until 1963, that the first translation of an Indonesian novel appeared: *Twilight in Jakarta (Senja di Jakarta)*, by Mochtar Lubis, translated by Claire Holt. In 1968 a second work by Lubis appeared, *Road with No End (Jalan Tak Ada Ujung)*, this one translated by Anthony H. Johns of Australia National University.

In 1967, Burton Raffel, an American scholar and poet, published the first critical study of Indonesian poetry in English, *The Development of Modern Indonesian Poetry*, and then, in 1970, *Chairil Anwar: Selected Poems*, which was soon followed by *The Complete Poems and Prose of Chairil Anwar*. He also published the *Anthology of Modern Indonesian Poetry*.

During the 1970s it was another individual, the Australian translator, Harry Aveling who sought to introduce Indonesia to the world through literary translations and over the next decade to come produced a wide range of literary translations which he lists in his article elsewhere in this issue.

In the early 1980s, I came into the translation ring as a single fighter, publishing, among other titles, translations of

the pre-war novel *Shackles (Belenggu)* by Armijn Pane, a novella by S. Rukiah titled *The Fall and the Heart (Kejatuhan dan Hati)*, and the first collection of poetry by Indonesian women authors: *A Taste of Betel and Lime (Seserpih Pinang Sepucuk Sirih)*. Under a penname, I also translated four works by Pramoedya Ananta Toer.

Around this time Max Lane, too, made his name as the translator of work by Pramoedya: the author's Buru-Island Quartet, including *This Earth of Mankind (Bumi Manusia)*, *Child of All Nations (Anak Semua Bangsa)*, *Footsteps (Jejak Langkah)*, and *House of Glass (Rumah Kaca)*. Eventually, these books came to be translated into more than 30 languages but even with Pramoedya's critical success and despite the efforts of all the single-fighters listed above, this did not lead to the publication of more Indonesian titles by commercial publishers.

### **A New Concept for Indonesian Literature in Translation**

In 1987, having worked as an Indonesian-to-English translator for close to a decade and having tried and mostly failed to excite the interest of English-language publishers

in Indonesian literature, I could see that the role of the single-fighter was doomed. A new plan, a new concept was needed: the establishment of an organization dedicated to the promotion and production of Indonesian literary translations, one that would take on the role eschewed by commercial publishers of creating a canon of Indonesian literature in English.

In the years since its establishment Lontar has produced more than two hundred titles covering a wide range of literary genre and interests. Together, these titles contain translations of work by more than 650 Indonesian authors. The Foundation's "Norton-like" anthologies of Indonesian drama, short stories, and poetry and its Modern Library of Indonesia series, which includes 50 titles thus far, and cover a span of time of almost one hundred years, provide readers with a history of Indonesia through its literature. The Foundation's BTW series, which will have in it close to 40 titles by 2019, showcases work by younger authors and their views on contemporary and topical issues.

*Illuminations: the Writing Traditions of Indonesia*, another landmark work, refutes the view of Indonesian literature as

a literature with no roots. Together, Lontar's titles have made it possible to teach Indonesian literature anywhere in the world through the medium of English.

Despite Lontar's work and its promotion of Indonesian literature abroad, up until 2015 (at the time of the Frankfurt Book Fair), the number of Indonesian literary translations published abroad, continued to be insignificant. One significant exception was the publication *The Rainbow Troops (Laskar Pelangi)* by Andrea Hirata in English and more than 40 other languages. Unfortunately, like Pramoedya before him, Hirata's success did not lead to a significant change in the situation abroad. I was forced to ask myself, what conditions were needed for change?

### **Commitment to Change**

In 2012 when a representative of the Frankfurt Book Fair (FBF) first visited Jakarta to explore the possibility of Indonesia becoming Guest of Honour Country at a future fair, I saw this as a harbinger of potential change. One of FBF's requirements for the selection of a country as Guest of Honour was the establishment of a translation funding

program. Up until this time, no such a thing had existed. Though Lontar had been in existence 25 years at this time, Lontar relied on fundraising and income from sales for the continuation of its publications program; the government had never provided financial subsidies to publishers for literary translations, either to Lontar or to publishers abroad.

When, in 2013, the Indonesian government finally signed the dotted line of an MOA with FBF, it made the commitment to fund a translation program. Though very slow in getting off the ground, through that translation funding program, more than 200 literary titles were translated into English and other languages before the time of Indonesia's appearance as Guest of Honour at FBF in 2015.

Since that time, and despite all the glitches and bureaucratic requirements that have stifled rapid expansion of the translation funding program (now called "LitRi"), more than 1,000 titles of both literary and non-literary work have made their way from Indonesian into other languages.

Though I was aware of it long before this time, lack of commitment on the government's part, specifically the absence of financial subsidies for literary translations, had been a major stumbling block in the effort to introduce Indonesian literature to the world. But even with the establishment of LitRi, was the problem really solved?

### **The Final "C"?**

Through the course of this article I have mentioned a number of elements that need to be in place for a successful translation funding program, the first being "content," the work that should be translated. The second is "concept"—that which needs to be done to have a country's canonical literature translated into other languages. The third is "conditions"—taking advantage of situations that arise (such as the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2015 where Indonesia appeared as Guest of Honour Country and the London Book Fair in 2019 when Indonesia will be Market Focus Country). The fourth is "commitment"—long-term financial commitment on the part of the government to underwrite the cost of a translation funding program as

well as other elements such as writers' residency programs and travel grants for writers. But, again, I ask, supposing that all these requirements are fulfilled, has the problem been solved?

Throughout the course of my career but especially since serving as coordinator of Indonesia's literary program at FBF-2015 and supervisor of Indonesia's translation funding program since 2016, I have met with representatives of numerous national translation funding programs: from Mexico, Poland, the Netherlands, Turkey, and South Korea, to name but a few. Several have achieved remarkable success in the promotion of their literatures through translation. I am especially in awe of the Korea Literary Translation Institute and what it has achieved through its funding programs.

Unfortunately, however, the problem doesn't end here because even the most enlightened policy and committed government can only achieve so much. Translation funding programs are driven by high-minded ideals whereas commercial publishers are driven by the profit motif—by what sells and what doesn't. And this, I see, where lies a

“disconnect”. Few commercial publishers will pick up titles that have little chance of commercial success. Further, if a book doesn’t sell well, they will do little to promote it and will let it languish or go out of print—thus defeating the long-term goal of the translation funding program itself.

When I established Lontar thirty years ago, I did not intend it to be a publishing venture. Lontar was meant to be an organization for the production of quality translations which, I naively hoped, would then be picked up and sold by commercial publishers. But that did not happen, in part, I suppose, because most of the titles that Lontar has published fall into the “classic” category—works by now-dead authors whose importance in the canon of Indonesian literature cannot be denied but whose chance for commercial success outside Indonesia’s borders is limited at best.

A similar situation holds for other translation organizations, particularly non-Western agencies whose country’s literatures are little known outside the country’s borders.

While it is important that a country's popular literature be translated and published around the world, the more important question is how to get "non-commercial" or canonical texts from our countries into the curricula of schools abroad and, eventually, into the hands of non-specialist readers.

This is where "cooperation," the final "C," is so important: working together with other countries to make sure that their country's literary wealth is accessible. In the end, all the translation funding programs around the world, are "single fighters" as well—struggling to make their literature known abroad but rarely, if ever, doing anything to accommodate the translation of other literatures into their languages.

From my office in central Jakarta I look out the window and pretend that I can see at Tanjung Priok harbour a flotilla of boats from other countries carrying their books to Indonesia and stevedores packing containers of Indonesian titles for shipment abroad. This is not the way distribution works these days but I prefer this romantic notion of mine:

countries working together, with mutual respect and for mutual benefit, to right the wrong of Babel—but not to recreate a single language; instead to enrich the world through a myriad of tongues.

*The Modern Library of Indonesia: Home of the "Classics"* **Pam Allen** was originally published in Issue 50 – Winter 2018

*My Lonely Life as an Indonesian Translator* **Harry Aveling** was originally published in Issue 52 – Winter 2019

*The View from Indonesia* **John McGlynn** was originally published in Issue 52 – Winter 2019

*In Other Words* is the national journal for practising literary translators and for everyone interested in the craft of literary translation.

Regular features include translators at work, international perspectives, and the annual Sebald lecture. Each issue has a specific theme. The journal was founded by Peter Bush in 1992 and published by the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT), founded by W.G. Max Sebald at UEA.

In 2015 Writers' Centre Norwich (now the National Centre for Writing) took responsibility for BCLT's public programmes and, as part of this, took over responsibility for publishing this prestigious magazine.

The National Centre for Writing (NCW) is a National Portfolio Organisation supported by Arts Council England. NCW is based in fifteenth-century Dragon Hall in Norwich, England's first UNESCO City of Literature. NCW supports emerging and established writers and seeks to explore the artistic and social power of creative writing through pioneering and collaborative projects with writers, readers, schools, libraries and cultural partners. NCW's programme

includes mentoring, workshops, conferences, live literature events and talks by internationally acclaimed writers.

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