

Ayu Utami (Indonesia)

Writing as Negating

(this paper is NOT meant as a written presentation)

The beginning period of my fiction writing was probably a sort of adolescent struggle to negate the father figure. My first two novels negated the convention of novel writing in Indonesia at that time, which was that a novel should have a linear and coherent plot. My novels do not have that. Both are stories told through different kinds of narration and by different characters. Each character has his or her own way of telling stories.

The first book ends when the protagonist Saman—a Catholic priest turned activist—admits his state of sexual impotence before his lover Yasmin, a married woman.

The second book ends when the protagonist Larung—a Balinese whose father was killed during the communist purge—is shot to death by a military colonel. But the structure of the books actually resembles the story each one tells. The books have the rhythm of their content. Each book always starts with the introduction of the main character in a detailed description as if to seduce the readers, but then finishes abruptly. With Saman, the abrupt end is the rhythm of sexual intercourse that ends with a premature ejaculation. With Larung, it is the rhythm of assassination.

Some of my readers criticized me for not having the same energy or pace when writing the first and the last chapter of *Larung* that I did when writing *Saman*. The first chapter was so dense, they said, but the last was fleeting, hanging. I replied that it was again a deliberate choice. I killed my protagonist without a dramatic scene whereas in the beginning I developed his character meticulously, and this is parallel to the way a military intelligence operation abruptly killed my friend, whose character developed throughout years of his life and whose personality was known by his friends throughout years of friendship.

To conclude, to answer the question “how I write:” I wrote in what is an unconventional style for a novel.

And the second question: why?

The beginning period of my fiction writing was probably a sort of adolescent struggle to negate the father figure. The father figure during that period was obviously manifested by the paternal values of the society and of the government. But my writing was also a reaction to the discipline of journalism in which I had been trained and by which I had been shaped.

- The non-linearity of the novels is the negation of strict linear journalistic writing.
- The novels’ explicit description of sexual organs is the negation of the grand-euphemism that prevailed in the Indonesian language. This negation can be seen in this example (which doesn’t sound as obscene as it is in the Indonesian language):

“You shall be called Woman because you were made from the rib of Man.”
Thus he was told by the whisper of God who suddenly reappeared. “And I will call these nipples because they are the tips of your breasts. And I will call this a clitoris because it is a petite phallus.” But he didn’t give the orifice a name.

But the character in my novels who I personally find the most intriguing with respect to this negating business is Shakuntala, because she represents negation at a more subtle level.

The first two negations are negations at a banal level. Moral values and journalistic discipline constitute authority figures too obvious not to challenge.

Shakuntala’s negation dwells in the subtlety of language. Shakuntala is a character who creates her own fairy tale-like personal history in order to be able to overcome her father’s repression. Her language is simple yet playful. She is the one who uses negative sentences the most among the characters. It seems that negation is her main *modus operandi* in telling her stories. Her stories are negations of history.

Later I found that those sentences are some of the trickiest ones to translate.

There are a number of theories and discussions, whether linguistic or philosophical, about negation and the negative sentence. But most of them agree on one thing: i.e. the negative sentence is a more complex sentence than affirmative or positive sentences. It is a judgment about a judgment. Some will call it a meta-judgment or a meta-representation. Anyway, it always implies a past. It always tells something other than itself, namely the thing that it negates.

Negative sentences are always more playful than affirmative ones. An affirmative sentence represents the present and may not imply a past at all. By means of negating, a negative sentence opens up a number of possibilities. That’s why negative sentences are capable of playfulness.

Examples:

(i) Negation with negative particles “tidak” (no/not), “bukan” (not) and “belum” (not yet)

Ketika sembilan tahun saya tidak perawan. Orang tidak menyebut anak perempuan yang belum berbuah dada sebagai perawan.

When I was nine I was not a virgin. People didn’t consider a girl who didn’t yet have breasts to be a virgin.

The first sentence “when I was nine I was not a virgin” opens different possibilities (e.g. “I broke my hymen when I was nine,” “I first had sex when I was nine,” etc.)

*

Kukira ayah dan ibuku memberitabuku terus-menerus—kamu anak perempuan—sejak aku belum bicara. Bagaimana aku bisa membantah jika aku tidak bicara?

Translation 1:

I suppose my father and my mother told me continuously—you are a girl—especially since I didn't yet talk. How was I to argue [with them] when I couldn't talk?

Translation 2:

I suppose my father and my mother told me continuously—you are a girl—before I could speak. How was I to argue when I didn't talk?

Translation 3 (literal):

I suppose my father and my mother told me continuously—you are a girl—ever since I didn't yet talk. How was I to argue when I didn't talk?

*

Di kepulauan Jawa dan Bali mereka melihat gadis-gadis menari telanjang di sungai. (...) Sebetulnya lelaki ramping coklat juga mandi di sungai, tetapi mata hanya melihat apa yang dipilih oleh bukan mata.

On the islands of Java and Bali they met brown maidens dancing naked in the river. (...) In fact slim brown men also bathed naked in the river, but the eyes only beheld what was chosen not by the eyes.

In the Indonesian language, the particle “bukan” (not) can be put before the noun, or before the other particle, or before the verb:

Dipilih oleh bukan mata (literal transl.: chosen by not (the) eyes)

Dipilih bukan oleh mata (literal transl.: chosen not by (the) eyes)

Bukan dipilih oleh mata (literal transl.: not chosen by (the) eyes)

(ii) Negation without negative particles: by counterfactual conditions, descriptions of what is not described, indirect/eluding answers:

Lalu ia membuka celananya. Dan tabulah aku bahwa matahari telah membakar pinggang, dada, dan lengannya. Dan aku pun menceritakan kisabku:...

Then he removed his trousers. Then I knew that the sun had baked his waist, chest and arms. And I told my story:...

*

“Hey new kid, where are you from?”

“I'm descended from the nymph.”

They laughed so hard it knocked me off my feet.

*

“Who are you?”

“People here bathe twice a day.”

Then he sucked the tips of my breasts, unendingly, and told me his story.

To summarize: the whole text of each of my two first novels is full of negation of the imagined authority. The negation comes by means of the structure of the sentences and the content. If I'm successful in negating the father figure, my next work will be a step forward to an attempt at self-negation.