

LITERATURE—OR A HOME INVENTED

Perhaps I am lying. I would say I have no home or homeland whatsoever. Or I have just erased the image of home because of a sad experience I am about to tell. Now I have to invent something like a home: it must be a hometown, just a small town—not so much a town, but half-kampong—in eastern tip of the Island of Java where I grew up. Our family moved there from the provincial capital where I was born; according to the tradition, my father had to take care of the family's house, land and petty business since the passing of his mother. Upon our three year living in the town, my father was missing; and our house was half-destroyed by the mob. It was said that my father was a communist and our house a place of gathering for the leftist artists. (Three years later, an eyewitness told my mother that our father was slaughtered in a coast 10 kilometers away up north from the town.) There was an imbalanced clash between the Communist Party in one camp and a joined force of the army and some religious- and antileftist groups in another camp, in which a half-million or so suspected communists were killed, mostly in Java and Bali, purportedly the most two civilized islands in the archipelago.

Trying to refute this bitter past, I would like to say that my home or homeland lies somewhere in the future. Like Borges, I would think that what I have is bibliography, not biography. I am searching for the father figure, and will find him as perhaps a poetic father or precursor, hopefully not one but several. But unlike the Argentine fabulist, I have no cosmopolitan education at all; hence it is always hard for me to make books stronger than the life-world, and representation more evocative than presentation. Until my early thirties, the furthest possible physical world that I can reach was just called Indonesia. I have been always a kampong lad, and, to paraphrase a poem of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra the Palestine poet, wherever I went to I brought with me a suitcase containing my hometown, the suitcase that reminds me I have lost my father and have been taken care of by my mother. In every journey, intellectual or otherwise, I do believe I could find any surrogate father. From this point on I have a chance to substitute my biography with bibliography.

Thus the mother- and father figure becomes a metaphor for literary sources that provide sustenance for me and I live for. It is hard to imagine how an Indonesian persona like myself make himself into a writer as the national language class is so bad at schools everywhere and the use of it as the language of communication in public life more than worse. Even there hasn't been even a standard(ized) national language, let alone a center of linguistic excellence. What we have in fact is only a bureaucratized language, and when people like to express themselves "authentically," they subvert, or just deviate from, the bureaucratic one, and the language is just turned into varied colloquial street dialects, or imbued with "Indoglish" Jakartan slang. The language, *babasa Indonesia*, or *babasa* for short, is actually only our second language. Our mother tongues are vernaculars that we used only orally, almost never in writing. Besides, the oral traditions are still pervasive all over in the country; and the orality, I suspect now, is just morphed so well into its next phase within the realm of Internet culture. For any writer in Indonesia, up until now, to swerve from his mother tongue to the *babasa*, is

a sort of *salto mortale*. It seems that we the writers could not save our mother tongues from dying.

That is why our writers are always trying to get their home back again; and this home is not what in English is defined as homeland, a word so much affixed with European, cosmopolitan flavor. The home is, in the *bahasa*, called *kampung balaman*; *kampung* is kampong or village, and *balaman* land surrounding the family house; but *kampung balaman* is an idiomatic expression with almost religious overtones, to signify a place or realm not only being one's origin but also that springs up his personality and makes him a part of his tribe as well. Our writers like to take shelter in the shadow of their mother tongues, or, more properly, in the legacy provided by them. The maxim so much in their favor is "*kembali ke akar tradisi*" or "*kembali ke sumber asli*," meaning to retrieve the maternal root and/or to the purest wellspring. They are haunted by the fiction that the *bahasa* or becoming a nation, far before the globalization sweeps over the archipelago, is more or less similar to an uprootedness situation. Indonesia is something between the home and the world, but then it has blocked our view to the world, before finally it replaces the world itself. National standard, culturally speaking, is everything, if not the alternative to international or transnational standards. A famous Malay proverb says, "*hujan emas di negeri orang, hujan batu di negeri sendiri, lebih baik di negeri sendiri*," which translates "even if there is rain of gold in foreign countries, and here in our land we have only rain of stones, to stay here is always much better." (Perhaps the non-existence of Indonesian diaspora can be explained through the adage.) If becoming the nation is everything, it practically means Indonesia is only an agglomeration of various ethnic groups speaking more 300 languages and dialects.

Anytime we are willing to possess Indonesia culturally, we get her only as a political entity. Everyone there pretends to forget the fact that the republic only came into being because of Dutch colonialism; that what was later called Indonesia was formerly only different kingdoms and sultanates that hardly knew each other and only became unified under the colonialism. Perhaps one of the most important points in Indonesian historiography is adoption of the local heroes as national ones as if they struggled for decolonization of the country while in fact they were only local feuds whose rebellion was just for gaining back their own thrones. The quasi-military regime that was in power for 30 years or so just educated the citizenry that Indonesia is so natural, already right in place since the very beginning of time, given. Our cultural politics—*kesatuan* (wholeness, unitedness) and *keaslian* (purity, originality)—is a way to overcome various regional separatisms and the great power struggle between the leftist and the army aforementioned. And the regime assumed the name *Orde Baru*, or the New Order, for itself, whose political culture is based on the fiction that our national culture is the summits, or refined extraction, of the regional ones. This is so much in pair with my fellow-writers' daydreaming of getting back to the maternal root or the purest wellspring. This deeds, to me, are no other than a new form of orientalism or essentialism, or an orientalism performed by the indigenous—because the cultural sources taken for granted as original are in fact those that had been constructed, invented, or codified by *Indologie*, which was colonial ethnography on Dutch East Indies.

But I digress, perhaps too far. I have said that wherever I am going to, I bring with me a baggage containing my home. Then I need not to find the way back or search for the purest well. Being with the suitcase, I just try to feel at home anywhere almost valiantly. Or when I

feel uprooted, I can open the suitcase, no, I just will do it in the future, never now, because “nowness” only makes my refinding only orientalized or essentialized. Thus I am suffered from schizophrenia. I am hesitated if what inside my valise now is only a hollow or violent picture. For the last ten years, as we have had two successive democratic elections and the coercion being lifted up, right after the patriarch stepped down, we get accustomed to violence and terrorism driven by ethnic and religious fundamentalisms. In a certain sense, such fundamentalisms begin with the fear that foreign power will deride and pollute the sacredness and the magic of *kampung halaman*. In other words, fundamentalism is the most expressive form of self-orientalizing and self-essentializing.

In the sweeping waves of indigenous orientalism and fundamentalism, I have made myself marginal to any cultural settings, including my original one. Hence the killing of my father and my nurturing with mother turned into a metaphor for my poetic enterprise. Leaving behind the first language, I have adopted the national language, the *bahasa*, as my mother tongue. With the persistence of this poetic mother figure, I am free to choose various poetic father figures from as many as spaces possible I like to arrive at. The mother will survive over the time and make sustenance for myself, but I could murder the fathers and choose others. Only by making the mother eternal, I am able to refuse to revisit my *kampung halaman*; and only she who has the power to diminish the appeal of self-orientalizing and fundamentalism. Playing at Lacan’s words “what one looks at is what cannot be seen,” I came to reaffirm that my fellow-writers pretend to look at all facets of their homeland, while in fact they see nothing. Or, they just see Indonesia as an extension of their *kampung halaman*.

Professing literature is to bold again and again the marginality towards the use of the bureaucratized language and the longish, distorted, colloquial echoes of it. Too often an Indonesian writer like myself has to play a role as public intellectual; and by assuming this persona—or being torn between estrangement and being well-received—he can make his linguistic, intellectual masterstroke seeps into into mass-media language, with which he keeps in touch with micro politics in the hopes for better changes. Then literature to me is a sort of temporary refuge or temporary homeland, where the writer has to question the basis of all linguistic representations—precisely because the majority of the writers bear in mind that literature is only a fixed tool for their being as the folk’s conscience. I suspect this seriousness, with its moral overtones, only make them false prophets or cheap message bearers. To my opinion, literature, poetry to be precise, has to be subversive, in the sense that it challenges all modes of communication commoditized.

Writing poetry, to me, is like to perform a Brechtian theater in which there must be another voice amongst the actors’ that finds the way out of the staging frame to alert the audience that what they see is only spectacle, neither the so-called reality nor the representation of the world; that they have to confront the director’s authority in order to find out their own resolution. In such a staging I have a chance not only to murder my poetic fathers but also to annihilate myself, my literary ego. A noted critic said that reading my poems makes us repeatedly ask a question, who speaks there in my poetry, where his voice comes from. I think she is not wrong. In my poems I have my authority and my biographical self as well gone. The elusive “I” in the poetry is, for instance, water which was in quarrel with its coffee concentrate in a cup, the bisexual serpent in the garden of Eden who was tempted by Adam and Eve, a queen bee who was not sure if she would soon be murdered by her twin or her

offspring, an earthenware that in the dark recalled the master-craftsman's hands, a tiger who was uncertain if he hunted or being hunted, a bull that freed himself from the painting plane to flirt with the painter's model-lover, a quixotic lover who was staring at his beloved (who did not see him) and was considered a left-handed dog by the passing pilgrims. If this poetic "I" has to claim to a homeland or origin, this must be the language, the *bahasa*, itself.

Further, the critic said that my poetry has something of intertextuality that creeps onto the world, stirring various cultural references into a new universe. While I am not so sure about her conclusion, I think she designates I am no longer an Indonesian poet in the shared sense of the word: I am only the one who performs—or is imprisoned by—the language, while his authority or authorial voice is ceasing out because the intertextuality soon kills him and hands over the signifying process to the reader. And, to paraphrase her again, the forms of my poetry—ranging widely from *pantun* (Malay old poetic form), *mantra*, *haiku*, sonnet, to free verse and prose poem—are only “as if” forms, the form-simulacra, that empty their essence out—or, if I may deduce further, the form being used with distanciation-effect, where meaning is never settled, only half-grasped, always slipping away from the reader who is—she quoted the lines of mine—“half-reading, half-blind.” Hence she seems to make theoretical grounding for my speculation that I could choose my poetic precursors from various traditions and murder them anytime in order to secure my poetic mother's survival.

Being my nearly unconscious stratagem, this intertextuality perhaps born out of my judgment from many years before that our genuine national language must be a sponge that absorbs the entire world. Another critic stated that in my poetry, the poet is no longer a creator but a *flâneur* who only follows where the streets let him go to. Perhaps he is right, but I would say that being a *flâneur* in the 21st century in a “Third World” country, when the global capitalism is so matured and without true contender, is to let yourself be guided by half-consciousness to keep you away from essentializing your literature, your language, your nation, your homeland. And this, to me, is no other than to approach, adopt, and steal the forms being possessed by various literary traditions across the globe. I make my (national) literature and world literature confront each other. However, my potential ideal readers who must be my fellow-writers just considered myself a vendor of world literature, which is, to their opinion, a set of foreign literatures, more properly those of Western hemisphere, that will disgrace the national identity politics so well maintained in our contemporary literary discourse. Under the eyes of those who are apparently half-reading half-blind, I have betrayed our homeland.

But nowadays they begin to know that in fact I am fully aware of ironic, almost absurd, relationship between various national literatures and the literary world system. Like Angloglobalism, the world literature is, to quote Franco Moretti, a slaughterhouse of literature, which only grabs a very little part from a huge mass of literary works across the globe to be marketed, and ignores even “slays” the rest. When it recently seems to broaden itself with *the other* literatures, it only does it with postcolonial mercy, namely affirmative action. Towards the literatures written in “wrong” languages—those so far-fetched from the orbit of imperial languages and the established schools of comparative literature—such as my language, the comparatists are only able to carry out the so-called distant reading, content-heavy reading, or let us say ethnographic reading, the one that makes the literatures only part of social canon, not literary canon of *Weltliteratur*. Still working in so delicate,

pleasing way, orientalism is the undercurrent of global networking today.

But more dangerous is self-orientalizing by the indigenous, as shown by my fellow-countrymen who have made their *kampung halaman* an antipode to the world. That is why I like to challenge them by saying that world literature is already inside ourselves, as the globalization makes us omnivorous creatures. Perhaps to their surprise I assert that never we do beg ours for to be adopted into *their* world literature. But we are no longer able to conserve our own sources, wellsprings and roots with a sort of naïve protectionism; on the contrary, we have to distort them, disturb them, leak them, overflow them, intertextualize them the farthest way possible under cosmopolitan perspective. This is our only way to define our literature, *our* world literature, which is always self-critical. I keep saying to my fellow-writers that every work of ours is potentially only a stain expelled to the gargantuan patchwork of great works too far produced along the history of mankind. Without this self-criticism and ironic stance, the world literature is merely a gigantic mirror reflecting our being as the world citizen ethnographized. Hence we have to murder ourselves, our persona as preserver of *kampung halaman*. Then the true homeland is no other than the language itself, the one absorbing the whole world. As I am trying to invent my homeland with this accented foreign language, I hope I am not lying now.