

Ben SOHIB

The Body Rejects Verdict

There was a time when I felt the body, its physical appearance—the shape of the eyes, nose, the color of the skin—was a judge's gavel, pounding wherever I went. With that gavel, people would judge my identity in the sense of ethnicity, religion, and lately even political preferences.

In a country such as Indonesia, where socio-political relations are very complex, in certain conditions identity becomes a big issue for many people, including myself. Born to the Hadhrami minority (as Indonesians of Yemeni descent are referred to), I received a verdict of identity at a very young age.

I was six when our family moved to a small mountainside village on the eastern tip of the island of Java. There my father worked a supervisor of a state-owned coffee plantation. The first weeks were the most difficult time for me and my siblings (the eldest was 11 years old), not only as we had to live in a new place, but also because we were terribly bullied by local children.

The kids would shout and follow us everywhere. Some adults, who could not bear seeing us paraded this way, would tell them to stop. But others could hardly hide a smile—they too enjoyed the spectacle. Although eventually they became used to the shape of our eyes and noses, racial attacks would continue for years, like when I fought with one of the boys over a kite.

It made me often complain to God, why wasn't I born similar to them? Why am I different? I needed a lot of time to finally see in this “bad fate” the biggest motivator for my creative potential. I would endlessly question why some people are born as majority and others are not. Why were some people's identity markers so obvious while in others they were vague? Why were some babies born to Muslim families and others to Christian ones? With various possibilities contained within them, these questions became the starting point for my writing.

Breathless and with my legs trembling, I watched how the shops owned by people of Chinese descent were demolished and set on fire during riots before the fall of Soeharto's regime in 1998, how churches blazed in East Java, how Christians in Ambon killed their Muslim neighbors and vice versa, how mosques were burnt in Papua, how the Dayak in Kalimantan with weapons in their hands stopped and searched buses for the Madurese, how the houses of the Shia and Ahmadi minorities were reduced to ashes in Madura and West Java.

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 27, 2019
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I watched it and my legs trembled, like back then when village kids made a show of me. But my hands were not trembling. My hand was steadily writing. And I could write a lot with a belief that, until they hear it themselves, no one can feel the horror of the strike of a gavel against the table of prejudice.

Through writing and other creative work, I've been trying to prevent people from turning my body—and the bodies of others—into a gavel for passing a verdict of identity. I am already far from all things primordial. I've been far from identities, be they ethnic or religious, since I left them behind to arrive at the calm river of **selfhood**.

Amid a very political year and the spread of religious conservatism in Indonesia, as well as the strengthening of right-wing politics globally, pessimism has settled in my mind whether indeed it is possible to get away from the “deadly verdict” of stereotyping that has been adopted in such a massive way. Then again, I've convinced myself that I am already in a safe place.

The mass trial will continue, but I am not in the dock—it is a trial in absentia. Is this an attempt at self-appeasement and self-deception? Maybe. But at least it keeps me writing.