

NESI Felix

Fun Part of Writing the Conflicts

I grew up in West Timor, an island in the eastern part of Indonesia, in a small village near the border between Indonesia and Timor Leste. Timor is far away from the capital city of Jakarta on Java Island, where the standardized knowledge and curriculum are produced. So when I started reading as a child, what I read were the stories about Jakarta and Java Island. And when I began writing at the age of 10, my short stories were about children in Java learning *silat* (martial arts) to catch a pickpocket in the train station, do detective things, etc.

It is good for my imagination. But later, when I tried to be a real writer and got my first advice, “Begin the writing with what you know,” I realized a big gap between what I wrote and what I lived with, or even what I did really feel. And once I tried to get to know myself, I realized that my life in Timor is full of dramas and conflicts, just like what is expected by most fictional readers.

During my childhood in the late 1990s to the early 2000s, the financial crisis hit some Asian countries. Students struggled to overthrow the dictator regime in Indonesia, and East Timor, my very neighbor, struggled to gain independence from Indonesia. I later realized that while I was busy reading and writing stories about Java, the armed soldiers and militias built an outpost in my village. And the refugees who lost everything in the East fled to the villages in West Timor, where the local government sheltered them. With the soldiers and militias walking around in the villages, gunshots were a lullaby. Every three or four months, there were markets, shops, or someone’s house burned down by the hysterical people for various reasons. At some point, we got used to the news of the killing—someone was beheaded for the accusation of being a spy; UN employees were burned alive in the city square; a speeding army truck crashed into pedestrians, etc.

Sometimes I wonder how I spent my time reading and writing about a faraway place while my people struggled with war, while there is a child inside of me terrified every time he sees a soldier or militia – long-haired men who bring guns everywhere they go.

I then realized that what I have experienced is just a reflection of Indonesian literature. Indonesia had been decolonized in the 1940s. But they learned how to be the colonizer—the massacring, the kidnapping, the exiling, colonization of East Timor and West Papua through invasion and pseudo-referendums in the 60s and 70s.

But until the end of the 1980s, there was no writing on that event. Indonesian literature was busy producing pieces about apples on the table or a young man who became a bad guy after being an atheist. Meanwhile—the innocent farmers who had ever received fertilizer from the communists; or the indigenous people who were not convinced with the so-called “legal” religion—were accused of communism, being slashed in the front of churches. Not to mention, there is no Timor and Papua occupation in Indonesian literature.

I forgive that ten-year-old me who writes about pickpockets in Java while someone inside him doesn't stop crying. But that ignorance of Indonesian literature while more than three million people were killed for nothing—is miserable. The writers are intellectuals, their voices always count, and they really have to say something.

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, April 8, 2022

Tariro Ndoro (Zimbabwe) / Felix Nesi (Indonesia) / Raghvendra Madhu (India) / Pamela Rahn Sánchez (Venezuela)

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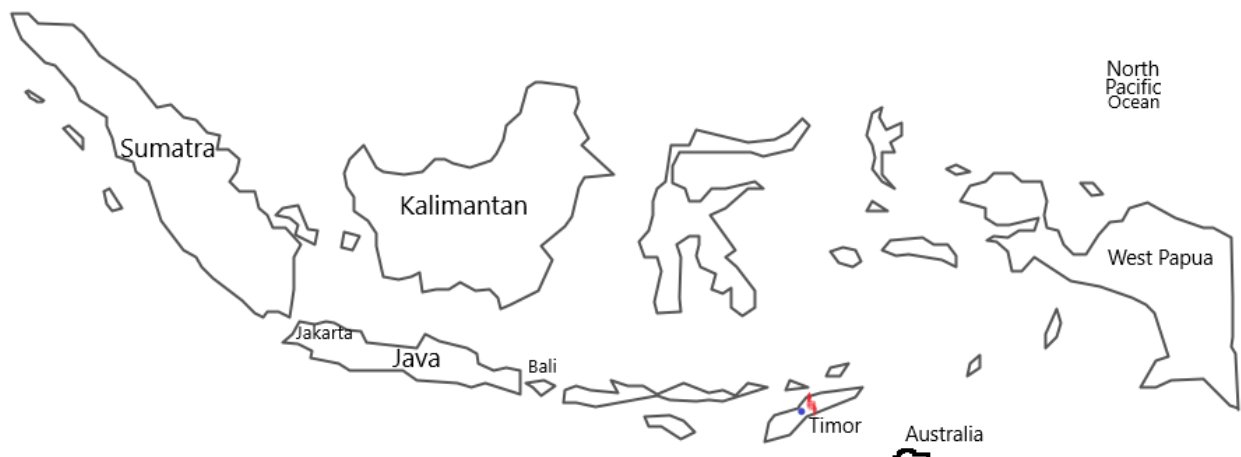
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Then the question among some writers in Indonesia is, does every writer have to be charged with the responsibility to make people/the readers aware of the injustice, conflict, and structural violence committed by their government? Can we just keep writing for the sake of the writing itself? If we keep talking about all the conflict, the sorrows, and the dark side of history, then where is the fun part of writing? I can't really answer that question. And if you are a writer, you will have the answer. But let me tell you about my experience.

As a young villager inherited by a complicated history of colonization, writing always helps me know myself better—meet all the wounds and pleasures, dreams, and imperfections of me as a human being. And every time I meet all those parts of me, there's always a child crying, deep in me, asking me for the existence of his fears and traumas in my sentences. I wrote it down, and it ended with all the drama and conflict— all fun things that I wanted to read.

And I can brag in front of my fellow writers from Java that I have so many stories with real drama to write. While they call out all the images to create a conflict about some aliens coming from the year 2300 and destroying the motherland, I always have a real drama to tell them: your beloved country attacks my island, kills the men, rapes the women, and brought the children to Jakarta to teach them how to be a gangster – because those kids have scary faces with black skin and curly hair.

And what's more fun? All that conflict was not fiction—but sometimes it feels more fictitious than the fiction itself.



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