

Okky MADASARI

Stories of Humanity, Stories for the Universe

So, what does fiction mean?

This question returned to haunt me when someone asked me to write an introduction for a book based on the Ahmadi people, who have been living at a refugee shelter in Lombok for the past 10 years now.

Yes, it has been 11 years since hundreds of Ahmadi, a persecuted Islamic minority, were thrown out of their homes and forced to live at a government building in Mataram, Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara province. And it has been four years since the publication of my third novel, *Maryam* (The Outcast), which tells of their fate. The novel won the Khatulistiwa Literary Award later in the year, and has since been read and discussed in Indonesia and abroad. And yet it's failed to create changes in the conditions of these people.

These same people are still living as refugees while their land and homes have been left empty and neglected, slowly destroyed by rain and heat as time passes by.

These people have lost their rights as citizens and human beings. They have been cut off from their right to choose their beliefs as well as from their right to live safely, and to decide their futures.

Old people die at the shelter while newborns come into the world as refugees. Children leave for school from a place they can't call home. Home is a big room where limited family space is bordered off by blankets and sarongs. An emergency kitchen is shared. Yet, children still laugh and play around the yard of the building.

It is the life of these Ahmadi people I tell in my novel—a fiction, but also a real life story.

The Ahmadi in Lombok are only one example of the real-life stories and injustices forgotten by our society in Indonesia, and neglected by our government and state. The Ahmadi are not the only group of people in the world who have been persecuted in this way—discriminated against and killed on the basis of their faith.

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My first novel *Entrok* (Years of The Voiceless) was published in 2010. At the time I was young and witnessing Indonesia ten years after the fall of the totalitarian regime. The nation, despite being a democratic country, was still facing problems of injustice, corruption, poverty, violence, and discrimination.

While the story is about Indonesia, it's also about democratic freedoms, about resisting military power, and saying 'NO' to control and censorship by our government. Themes that resonate across the world.

My second novel, *86*, is about how corruption became a systematic problem in Indonesia. Isn't

corruption also one of the biggest problems in the world now? Yet many of us still don't realize that corruption isn't about some people stealing money. More than that, it is a problem for humanity, which leads people to live under poverty, receive a poor education, and lack of health service.

My third novel *Maryam* (The Oucast), tells the story of an Islamic minority group that has undergone persecution, intolerance, and violence, and has been living in a refugee camp. Discrimination and intolerance are happening everywhere in the world. It's not just about Indonesia or Islam.

My fourth novel *Pasung Jiwa* (Bound/*Gebunden*) touches on LGBT issues in Indonesia, and my latest novel, *Kerumunan Terakhir* (The Last Crowd) looks at the problems technology presents to society.

All of my novels talk about the condition of Indonesia, attempting to portray its people and condition from the previous regimes until the present day. While they are about certain people, and about a nation in a certain part of the world, they reflect the stories of people all across the globe trying to handle the pressing problems of our time.

I'm often invited to talk about my novels, my society, Indonesia, and of course Islam. Some are legitimately curious about my works, while others are more curious about the writer—a Muslim woman who is able to criticize her society and religion.

But I've never catered my writing to an international public or to publishers. In fact, I've never even given the local and universal much thought. Simply put, I write about what's important to society, so the voiceless can be heard, and the forgotten remembered. I believe the problems in Indonesia are globally shared. Because of this, we speak in one common tongue: humanity.

So if the question is, "Should a writer speak on behalf of 'the universal'?", then I think there is something wrong with the question itself. The universal and local don't exist when we talk about humanity, human rights, consciousness, courage, and freedom. A problem in one country is a problem for the world. And so is its story.