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Why I Write What I Write and How I Write It: a Writer's Puzzle

***Puzzle:** A game; can be taken lightly or seriously; scattered pieces here and there dreaming of a whole image; flashes of images; puzzling. And so the play begins: discerning an image, fitting the pieces together, breaking them down again, re-ordering, starting from the puzzle's edge, seeking the hidden, emerging images, branching-out, intensifying, recurring. The interconnectedness of the pieces: parts becoming whole, creating a semblance of order out of the disorder, giving form to the formlessness. And at the end, one stares at the images in the big picture that turn out to be entirely different from what one had in mind; and one is left puzzled as ever.*

“Puzzle” will act as the keyword for this discussion. The word is very suitable because writing for me has always been like working on a puzzle, and I write for some reasons which still puzzle me thus far. So perhaps the better way to approach the topic is by scattering a few puzzle pieces in random order, and perhaps you can get a glimpse of the big picture.

Some Plausible Reasons for Writing: The answer to the first question: “Why does one write what one writes?” is simply because there are things that leave me puzzled with my head reeling in dizzy confusion, and I happened to stumble into writing one day and happily discovered that it is my only way out of this confusion. It came quite accidentally, and afterwards, naturally. Apart from my childhood infatuation with puzzles, and coincidentally I live in a country that looks on the map like scattered pieces of puzzle—Indonesia is indeed a puzzling country, another plausible reasons for writing is that it puts my thoughts in order, or a semblance of order; some people are cursed with chaotic minds, and writing becomes a sweet salvation for the chaos, puzzlement and awe in one's head. Another reason for writing is to make sense of the happenings around me—to give form to thoughts, feelings, perceptions, phenomenal forms, the five sensual and mental continuums, all which comprise our consciousness and our existential experience. The impalpable reality turn into words: e.g. the horror of war, the taste of a fruit, the human condition, the inner workings of a human being in extreme situations, loneliness of old age, etc.

Writing is a mysterious and elusive process, and surely there must be other unconscious reasons beyond my awareness which render writing to one of the most pleasant things to do, making the process puzzling to me as ever, from the beginning to the end. And how ideas, or phrase, or words appearing like organic entities that grow and proliferate, taking flight according to their whims, is another great mystery. And anything that puzzles is surely fascinating: these become my subject matter.

In the beginning was the word, and a shape. Ideas and inspirations come from both an inner and outer world. My stories usually start from flashes of words, or phrases, or lines, or a certain geometrical shape, which would arise in my mind and keep reverberating for an uncertain period of time. That's how I know that my mind is brewing a story. This is followed by random scribbling and drawing. Paragraphs or chapters are not written in linear fashion, but fashioned out of a cut-and-paste technique, and then are fitted together in the passages in one chapter or chapters in one book.

Inspirations are also achieved from countless stimuli in the outer world: nature, a painting, graphic works, comics, posters, advertisements, etc. Half of the stories in my second book, *Laluba*, were inspired by the works and life of the Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher, whose works I admire, disorienting and mind-boggling as they are. My other story of a circus dancer who can spin faster than her own shadow, came from a poster of a blurred ballerina dressed in red. I also find exotic sounds inspiring, such as the name of a city or village, archaic words, or words in the local languages that strike my ears delightfully or roll nicely off the tongue. Indonesia has more than 500 languages and dialects with different distinctive traits, even alphabet systems. This richness in vocabulary becomes a fertile ground as well as a challenge for me to take these languages from the margins into the center, the lingua franca. The titles of my two books are not even Indonesian words.

Methods, Motifs & Patterns: “*Apa-apa jatuh ke mana-mana,*” *Everything falls everywhere.* The novel *Cala Ibi* started with this phrase that played repeatedly in my mind. The next thought was the story: two women writing about each others’ existence. Then came the shape, which would be the form (and content) of the novel: a horizontal eight, the symbol of infinity in arithmetic. This shape forms a circular loop, mōbius strip, a tangled hierarchy of sort, in which the two stories intertwine and enfold back into themselves—beginning is the end is the beginning...—the story goes on and on. Readers can start from any chapter in the book and would find themselves back to square one.

The shape and the phrase are recurrent motifs that appear here and there throughout the novel as an event, thought, or image, resonating in slight variations and derivatives. Meaning is shown as a process, unstable, always shifting on different contexts, open-ended, multilayered. Mostly I use lyrical and figurative language that is suggestive rather than definitive, hinting instead of stating. I steer away from singular, tight and fixed meaning. My writing tends to be disjointed, discontinuous, disorderly, non-linear, a hit-‘n-run/hide-‘n-seek game, seemingly arbitrary; yet this is only the way it seems. Under closer scrutiny, readers will discover an underlying structure, which is what I also discover, gradually into its complete disclosure only in the process of writing. The fragmentary nature of the writing renders each chapter to be read independently like a short story. Readers can always throw away the book after reading five pages or so if they are annoyed. Perhaps I do this, also, because I like the idea of constantly disturbing the reader, making them aware that they’re reading a book—mere words and letters, just a literary landscape.

The shape of this horizontal eight became my point of departure to delve deeper into the novel’s motifs or patterns: duality, mirroring, meta-fiction—in which it tells about the process of writing, reading and narrating in the text. And these lead to other thematic preoccupations such as language, consciousness, reality, history, ethnicity, etc.

Writing in this discontinuous web-like pattern means letting loose of the reins of the text, wandering to wherever the words and lines take me, taking leaps and bounds, discovering connections, surprises, and coincidences along the way. Thus writing becomes a way to learn to trust my own instincts and to go by my nerve—to play; to take risks; to allow mistakes, spontaneity, changes, and doubt to take place in the process of writing; to pass back and forth and to feel over words, over lines: to love language.

Another idea for this kind of writing was to construct events from words down to the level of the individual letter. The naming of characters plays an important part since these words act as ignition for the branching-out of associative ideas. The proliferations form a web-like structure, a kind of semantic network, in which everything falls everywhere, interconnected; the nodes are not in linear sequence, but patterns of relationships that are inseparable. Nothing stands on itself.

In this web of writing, a little tiny change can turn into a gargantuan effect, like Lorenz's butterfly effect (It is a pleasant coincidence, to find out that the Strange Attractor has a horizontal eight shape, with more lines and trajectories.). All nodes related to that change would also have to change, respectively changing other nodes connected to them. I ended up elsewhere than I intended to be, falling to everything and everywhere, but it is a trip and a risk worth taking.

Dualities: *Maya-Maia*, dream-reality, night-day, logic-imagination, form-content, beginning-end, prose-poetry, order-disorder, sense-nonsense, center-margin, city-forest, fact-fiction, feminine-masculine, writer-reader, etc. I play with these dualities through the narratives of the two women living in two different worlds, by juxtaposing, contrasting and confronting the opposites. And inevitably, I find myself transgressing the boundaries, blurring and merging both sides into a penumbra with no clear edges, a hazy area in which no hierarchical order exists. The twin poles blend, complement and strengthen each other to pave a different way to discern our so-called reality. As the outcome there is a third sort of entity that dwells in this grey area: a hybrid of the two, but neither of those two.

A Universe of Verses: The idea of constructing events from words, I suppose, sprang up from my religious background. I have always been fascinated with the concept in Islam which sees all creations in the universe as *ayat*, *verses*, and *signs*, *kalimatullah* (*words of Allah*). In Islam, parallel to the linguistic genesis in Judeo-Christian tradition, the coming into existence of the universe started from the first divine saying '*kun fayakun*' (*Be, and the word becomes*). The concept of *kalimatullah*, *the universe of verses*, or, *verses of the universe*, is explored in several chapters. The two women eventually come to this haunting premonition that each of them is the creation and creator of the other. But which is which does not really matter as they face the ultimately reality: that their universe is a book, and they are mere characters in this literary mindscape, a construct of vowels and consonants. The word *human* is only a word amidst infinite words, a verse among other verses in the uni-verse. And what follows is silence. In this light, life for them becomes a process of signification in the multitude of signs in the universe. And perhaps, inevitably, this is where I had to take a plunge to the abyss of language.

Language: It is unadvisable for a beginner writer to start with a novel, and on top of that, it is unadvisable for the beginner to come to doubt the very tool, language itself. It is an early doom. After I experienced the pure bliss of discovering how fascinating language is—its richness, play, subversions, possibilities contained and allowed in itself; another aspect of language, as a formal system, convention with its many codes and practices, language itself appeared to me more disconnected from actuality. Some ideas and experiences occur at the very limits of what words can accomplish; representation of concepts and propositions fail their own process. The expressive power of language and its limits of communicability were questioned throughout the *Cala Ibi*, in a hesitant way, as if torn between speech and silence,

absent yet present. Eventually the book shows that language is inadequate to represent reality, words fall away when it comes to the direct experience of reality that is amorphous and ineffable. The book defies the logocentrism that we have always taken for granted: language as the precise, stable and definitive representation of *Reality*. In the end, experience is the reality; it is primary, and can only be *felt*, while language is abstract—secondary, derivative, limited, even empty in itself (e.g. the experience of eating sushi vs. the description of sushi on the menu).

Here is the paradox of language—how the experience itself could only find its form when articulated in language. The semantic construction is what creates the substance out of the formlessness of reality, of our existential experiences in it. And this is the beauty of language, it is valuable not because of their mimetic capacity to represent reality, but because of its power to produce it. It is our last frontier. And at the end, language (and the two characters in my novel), having been traversing the webs and journeys and arrive before the larger reality, must stand before it in absolute silence, in awe. There are stories that one can tell, and stories that should be left untold.