

Umar Kayam Ambivalence Language Literature Society

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Umar Kayam's Postcolonial Ambivalence

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The apparent absence of substantive critical awareness of the colonial or postcolonial situation of Indonesian literature is interesting considering that even the Javanese literature of the nineteenth century already showed the internalisation of the ideology of colonialism, as reflected for example in *Serat Baron Sakendher (The Book of Baron Sakendher)*, justifying Dutch colonialism over Java. The relatively limited presence of the postcolonial both in Indonesian literature and literary criticism is, at least to a large degree, because of five factors.

The first factor contributing to Indonesian writers' limited engagement with the colonial, anti-colonial and postcolonial is the history of Dutch colonialism that never whole-heartedly enforced the politics of assimilation (although this does not mean that the Dutch did not exploit the Javanese wholeheartedly). Ricklefs (14) notes:

But the Netherlands home government did indeed make a great deal of money. The prosperity, development and industrialization of the Netherlands in the course of the nineteenth century rested in significant measure on the agricultural products squeezed out of the Javanese.

Frequently around the world it has been colonial policy to assimilate the colonized to the mother country's values and tastes, a process carried out through education and the enforcement of rigorous language policies. The Dutch colonial government, however, was never so interested in making the peoples of East Indies the replica of the Dutch, most probably because initially East Indies colonialism was a purely economic enterprise run by a private company, VOC (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* - The Dutch East India Company). Consequently the main aim of its operation was profit generating enterprise until it collapsed in 1800. When finally taken over by the Dutch government, it retained the existing traditional power relations in such a way as to build efficient colonial machinery, without planning an extensive Dutch speaking local bureaucracy.⁸ The shallow roots of Holland's influence can be seen from the fact that in 1930 only 3% of the total native population was able to read and write simple Dutch (Mohammad 186). Given such superficial exposure, the issues of assimilation and mimicry in the Indonesian experience have not been as strong as in India, Africa and the Caribbean.

The second factor is more tangible: the impact of censorship by *Balai Pustaka*, the major colonial publishing house during the period of Dutch colonization, which played an important explicit role in limiting attention to anti-colonial and postcolonial themes up to 1942 because it was under the total control of the colonial Dutch.⁹ Although the official objective of *Balai Pustaka* was to publish quality books for the East Indies' public, the other unspoken aim was also to banish books endangering colonial rule.

⁸ How the Javanese social system was manipulated by and for the colonial purposes has been elaborated in detail by Heather Amanda Sutherland, "Pangreh Pradja: Java's Indigenous Administrative Corps and Its Role in the Last Decades of Dutch Colonial Rule," Yale, 1973.

⁹ Detail elaboration of *Balai Pustaka*'s colonial role can be seen in Doris Jedamski, "Balai Pustaka: A Colonial Wolf in Sheep's Clothing," *Archipel* 44 (1992).

However the continuing absence of postcolonial reflection even after colonialism needs further explanation.

The third factor diverting Indonesian writers from tangling with their postcolonial legacy is the massive death-toll following the attempted coup of 30 September 1965, known as *Gestapu* (*Gerakan Tiga Puluh September*). The centrality of this violent history to the development of an Indonesian nation state might explain why Indonesian writers in the twentieth century turned their gaze away from colonial violence, possibly in fear of being confronted by anticipations of post-independence conflict. Aijaz Ahmad also noticed a similar trajectory in the Indian context:

Our 'nationalism' at this juncture was a nationalism of mourning, a form of valediction, for what we witnessed was not just the British policy of divide and rule, which surely was there, but our own willingness to break up our civilizational unity, to kill our neighbours, to forgo that civic ethos, that moral bond with each other, without which human community is impossible. A critique of others (anti-colonial nationalism) receded even further into the background, entirely overtaken now by an even harsher critique of ourselves. (Ahmad 119)

What has been observed here by Ahmad about Indian literature, where anti-colonialism was rapidly displaced by domestic themes, is perhaps comparable with the case of Indonesian postcolonial literature. The difference is that in Indonesian case the reflection on the colonial legacy was superseded not by partition but by the trauma of ideological war, culminating in the abortive coup of *Gestapu* 1965. This tragedy and the political atmosphere that followed have traumatized the nation so that the production of Indonesian literature ever since has been dominated by a combination of realism and liberal humanism which might be said to have buried or left behind the tragic events of the recent past.

The fourth factor is the domination of a liberal humanist stream in the Indonesian academic and literary scene which contributes to the absence of a critical evaluation of colonialism in Indonesian literature because it tends to consider ideological questions not to be appropriately literary ones. Some works exhibiting a strong anti-colonial resistance, such as Pramoedya's *Buru* tetralogy, represent an exception for these critics rather than a norm in Indonesian literature. So, for example, Keith Foulcher claims that Indonesian postcolonial literature has developed in a direction different from that of other postcolonial countries:

The modernizing gesture that in African and other Third World literatures took shape through a combination of realism and anticolonialism found expression in Indonesia rather through the linking of realism with loosely defined universalism and liberal humanism (Foulcher 159-60).

The fifth factor is addressed by Keith Foulcher and Tony Day, who speculate that one of the culprits for the absence of a more developed postcolonial literature has something to do with language. The constitution of Indonesian as the national language contributes to the complexity of the formation of postcolonial literature in particular because it is a language that does not have a shared root in the East Indies' vernacular languages. When literature had to develop in this national language, most vernacular writers initially, and some probably still at present, faced a language barrier because they had to express what they had experienced within a vernacular language in another language that was not, and is not yet, "the language of family" (Day 221). Foulcher and Day argue that the language and hence literature produced by 'unrootedness' becomes evasive when dealing with anti-colonial issues.

Umar Kayam and His Works

Among the few vernacular writers whose stories deal with the legacy of colonialism (but who is less discussed in a postcolonial perspective) is Umar Kayam. Umar Kayam was born in a small town, Ngawi, East Java on 30th April 1932. His father was a teacher of HIS (*Hollandsch-Inlandsch School*, Dutch Native School), an elite school for *priyayi* children who would be government officials. Being a *priyayi* son, Kayam was able to study in HIS. He liked learning languages and reading Dutch stories so that in the fifth grade of HIS he was able to read and speak Dutch. He used both high Javanese and Dutch when communicating with his parents at home (Rahmanto 2).

Kayam experienced both Dutch and Japanese colonialism. When the Dutch were defeated by Japanese troops and Java was under Japanese occupation in 1942, Kayam witnessed the transition in his education system; suddenly there was no place for the Dutch language in East Indies schools and instead the use of Indonesian was encouraged by the Japanese authority. He considered that the positive if ironic legacy of Japanese colonialism was that "*Jepang berjasa mengindonesiakan kita dalam waktu sekejap*" ("The Japanese succeeded in making us Indonesian in a very short time") (Rahmanto 2).

Kayam graduated from high school in 1951 and continued to study in the Faculty of Education at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, until he graduated in 1955. He earned his Master's degree in Education from New York University in 1963 and his Doctor of Philosophy from Cornell University in 1965 (Rahmanto 4). Kayam's education background is so rich because he was a Javanese *priyayi* who had been educated in the Dutch, Japanese and National system before finally he tasted the U.S. education system.

Upon his return from the States in 1965 he was appointed by President Soeharto as the Director General of Radio, Television and Film, staying in the position until 1969. Until his death in Jakarta in 16th March 2002 he was active as Director in many significant positions such as at the Jakarta Art Council (1969-1972), the Centre of Social Sciences Training Universitas Hasanudin and Universitas Gadjah Mada (in 1975-1976 and 1977-1997 respectively).

Kayam's first story, "Seribu Kunang-kunang di Manhattan" (A Thousand Fireflies in Manhattan) was first published in an Indonesian literary magazine, *Horizon*, in 1966. His longer short stories, "Sri Sumarah" and "Bawuk" were published together in one book in 1975. His New York stories, "Seribu Kunang-kunang di Manhattan," "Istriku, Madame Schiltz dan sang Raksasa" (My Wife, Madame Schlitz and the Monster), "Sybil," "Secangkir Kopi dan Sepotong Donat" (A Cup of Coffee and a Doughnut), "Chief Sitting Bull" and "There Goes Tatum," were published in one book titled *Seribu Kunang-kunang di Manhattan* (1972). His other stories, "Musim Gugur Kembali ke Connecticut" (Fall in Connecticut), "Kimono Biru buat Istri" (The Blue Kimono) were compiled with the Manhattan stories, as well as "Sri Sumarah" and "Bawuk," in a collection *Sri Sumarah dan Cerita Pendek Lainnya* (1986). The same collection was translated in English by Harry Aveling in a collection of short stories titled *Sri Sumarah and other Stories* (1976). Kayam's other collection of stories are *Parta Krama* (1997) and *Lebaran di Karet, di Karet ... (Eid al-Fitr at Karet, at Karet ...)* (2002). Kayam also wrote two novels, *Para Priyayi (The Nobles)* (1992) and *Jalan Menikung: Para Priyayi 2 (The Winding Road: The Nobles 2)* (1999).

Umar Kayam also wrote sociological treatises such as *Seni, Tradisi, Masyarakat (Art, Tradition, Society)* (1981), *The Soul of Indonesia: A Cultural Journey* (1985) (translated into Indonesian as *Semangat Indonesia: Suatu Perjalanan Budaya* (1985)) and *Kelir Tanpa Batas (Screen Without Borders)* (2001). He was also a columnist in a local news paper of Yogyakarta, *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, where he regularly wrote on Tuesdays. His columns have been published in four books, *Mangan Ora Mangan Kumpul*

(*Nothing Is More Important than Being Together*) (1990), *Sugih Tanpa Banda (Being Rich without Money)* (1994), *Madhep Ngalor Sugih, Madhep Ngidul Sugih (Always Be Grateful)* (1998), and *Satrio Piningit ing Kampung Pingit (The Messiah from Pingit Kampong)* (2000).

Kayam's Ambivalence

Umar Kayam's fictions are better known than his non-fiction. He himself was more comfortable writing fictions than non-fictions despite his well-known position as a social scientist. As mentioned by Rahmanto (7), Umar Kayam thought that although social science texts and fictions are similar in that neither can grasp reality as it really is, nevertheless fictions are more true to life than scientific texts:

la selalu mengkritik bahwa ilmu social itu belum mengerti tentang kehidupan. la lalu bertanya, siapakah yang tahu tentang kehidupan. Harusnya seorang sastrawan (penulis fiksi), karena seorang sastrawan menulis tentang kehidupan.

He always criticized social sciences for their inability to understand life. He then asked who really understood life. He believed that a poet (a fiction writer) knew better because a poet wrote about life.

Probably what Kayam meant is that since reality is always mediated by language and personal observation, any description of it will never elicit a single interpretation of truth. In Kayam's mind poets know better than social scientists because a poet's approach to life is more intimate.

Following the above precept, Kayam often takes as a starting point his observation of real people. "There Goes Tatum," was written based on his experience of witnessing a lady being mugged by a black boy. Rahmanto reports:

Peristiwa perampasan di siang hari bolong di tengah keramaian kota dunia, di depan hidungnya itu sangat mengejutkannya. Pengalaman yang di dalam cerpen itu diakuinya sebagai pengalaman yang menimpa dirinya itulah yang dengan lancar dituturkannya dalam cerpen pertamanya itu. (Rahmanto 8)

The robbery taking place in broad daylight in the middle of a busy metropolitan city right in front of him surprised him a great deal. He admitted that the experience in the short story was based on that experience.

In general, Kayam's Manhattan stories are the results of his keen observation of Manhattan and New York during his postgraduate study. He portrays the metropolitan city as busy and energetic but at the same time he feels the loneliness and anonymity of its inhabitants. "Seribu Kunang-kunang di Manhattan" is inspired by the lights of Manhattan's night time from a distance that reminds him of fireflies he often saw in a Javanese village. "Istriku, Madame Schlitz, dan Sang Raksasa" is also inspired by a real woman -- *seorang janda tua yang gemuk yang selalu mengetuk pintu apartemennya untuk meminta tolong ini dan itu* (an old chubby widow who liked to knock at his apartment door to ask for help with this and that) (Rahmanto 9).

"*Isim Gugur Kembali ke Connecticut*" and "Bawuk" were written when Kayam was the Director General of Radio, Television and Film from 1966 to 1969. As history tells, in 1965 a group of civilians and dissident army battalions staged a failed coup by murdering top army generals. This movement was dubbed *Gestapu* (*gerakan tigapuluh September* - the thirtieth September movements) by the successful army counter-coup, neatly referring both to the date of the incident and to the Gestapo in Germany

as part of a sophisticated ideological program to link left-wing groups to totalitarianism while introducing a markedly totalitarian 'New Order' throughout Indonesia. The years when Kayam was the Director of the office of Radio Television dan Film were the years when the New Order 'sterilized' government departments by eliminating alleged Communist sympathizers from their former posts. Kayam, perhaps with an unconvincing show of naiveté, claims that his stories were an attempt to resolve the ambivalences of his position in his role as Director General of a key propaganda agency. Kayam reveals that those years were:

... tahun-tahun yang penuh dengan pesona petualangan, tetapi sekaligus juga kebingungan, ketegangan, dan kebingungan. Sebagai pejabat muda yang mempunyai beban kekuasaan yang besar, dan kegairahan seorang doktor muda yang percaya akan datangnya suatu orde yang baru dan yang menggantikan orde yang lapuk, Umar Kayam membersihkan lingkungan kerjanya dari semua unsur orde yang lapuk itu. Akan tetapi, bersamaan dengan itu, ia menyaksikan juga korban-korban yang seharusnya tidak menjadi korban. Ia mempertanyakan siapakah yang menentukan "harus" dan "tidak harus" menjadi korban itu? Dalam kebingungan dan ketidakmengertian itu, ia mencoba mempertanyakan lewat cerita pendek yang disusunnya. Maka lahirlah cerpen "Musim Gugur Kembali di Connecticut" dan "Bawuk". (Rahmanto 9-10)

... adventurous years filled with confusion, tension and uncertainty. As a young director with big power combined with his enthusiasm as a new Ph.D. graduate, Umar Kayam was involved in sterilizing his office from the supporters of the Old Order. However, at the same time, he witnessed the victimization of the innocents. He questioned who had the authority of the discretion? In his uncertainty and incomprehension, he tried to question through his stories. That was how "The Fall in Connecticut" and "Bawuk" came into existence.

The main character in those stories, Tono and Bawuk, are innocent victims of this political repositioning. Kayam tries to fathom the victimization of these innocent victims from their side. It reveals how the tragedy is devastating for them, even more so because they are unable to voice their own narrative against the injustice of their categorization as fabricated.

As for the title, "Fall in Connecticut", Kayam mentions that there is a connection between what he felt during the autumn in Connecticut and the gloomy atmosphere of the rubber plantation in some city in Indonesia where alleged *Gestapu* members were assassinated. Laksana, as quoted by Rahmanto, reports Kayam's testimony:

Saya ingat musim gugur, saya ingat orang mau dieksekusi. Cerita tentang PKI itu bermacam-macam, yang mati di kebun karet juga banyak. Lalu fantasi saya berkembang. Musim gugur di Amerika itu indah sekali. Masih dingin tetapi sudah tidak terlalu dingin lagi, langit beralih warna kemerah-merahan, daun-daunan begitu indah' pada berguguran berganti warna. Ketika mengalami musim gugur, saya membayangkan ada orang gugur di kebun karet. Itu peristiwa yang sangat dahsyat. (Rahmanto 10)

Autumn always reminds me of those executed. There are various stories about the Communist Party and many of its members were executed in a rubber plantation. My imagination developed. Autumn in the U.S. was very beautiful. It was still cold but not too cold; the sky was reddish; the leaves falling changed their colour beautifully. In autumn, I imagined those killed in the rubber plantation. It was a shocking incident.

Two other stories, “Sri Sumarah” and “Kimono Biru buat Istri” are related to the *Gestapu* incident. They were written in Hawaii after Umar Kayam left the directorate office of Radio Television and Film (Rahmanto, 2004, p. 10). “Sri Sumarah” tells the life of Sri Sumarah, a *priyayi* wife, whose only daughter has been involved in the Communist Party. This leads to her social degradation; she is forced into becoming a woman working as masseuse door to door. In “Kimono Biru buat Istri”, Kayam pursues further the impact of the *Gestapu* tragedy on modern Indonesia. Wandu in the short story is described by Kayam as a corrupt businessman and politician who becomes an integral part of the New Order.

Kayam also makes use of his own experience when writing *Para Priyayi*. His childhood memories, his extended family and his journey to a grown up *priyayi* stimulate him to write the novel (Rahmanto, 2004, p. 11). Kayam also claimed in an interview that:

nama kota Wanagalih yang ada di dalam novel itu adalah nama kota imajiner yang mirip Ngawi tempat ia dilahirkan. Sebagai bahan novelnya, selain mengumpulkan ingatan, perbincangan, pengalaman Kakek, Ayah dan ia sendiri di masa lalu, Umar Kayam juga membaca disertasi Onghokham tentang Madiun, buku James Rust tentang perdagangan opium di Jawa, dan studi tentang Road to Madiun dari seorang pakar Cornell University. (Rahmanto 11)

Wanagalih in the novel is an imaginary town that looks like Ngawi where he was born. He collected the materials for the novel from his memory, conversation, the experiences of his grandfather, father and he himself. He also read Onghokham’s dissertation, James Rust’s book on the opium trading in Java, and a study on *Road to Madiun* by a Cornell researcher.

From this explanation it is clear that Kayam himself thought that real people and places were essential in constructing his fiction. The reason for this might be Kayam’s emphasis on the importance of faithfulness to life. Perhaps for the same reason his fiction tends to portray reality in a manner that develops without sophisticated plot structure but rather emphasizing the linear and contingent relationships that are a common perception of how real life is shaped.

Para Priyayi tells the story of a young man called Sastrodarsono who pioneers his family’s social mobility from peasantry to nobility (*priyayi*). Although born peasant, Sastrodarsono succeeds in adjusting himself to *priyayi* way of life and his children also become educated *priyayi*. Hardojo becomes a teacher; Noegroho becomes an army officer; and Sumini is married to a high government official *priyayi*. Kayam models Sastrodarsono and his family after his own life and the experience of someone who has been through Dutch colonialism, Japanese colonialism and Independence. The difference is that Kayam was born *priyayi* while Sastrodarsono earns his status by studying and becoming a teacher.

Kayam, as reported by Rahmanto (11), wanted to ‘write back’ to what the social scientists from the West have written about *priyayi* through his novels. Kayam intended to fathom the world of *priyayi* from the insider’s point of view in order to counter the view that *priyayi* is a static concept as some Western writers theorize. Kayam argues (Rahmanto 12) that Although the most able Western researchers might be able to *speak* Javanese, they cannot really get inside and understand the symbolic nuances, wishes and disappointment of *priyayi* class in pursuing *kamukten* (prosperity). It is not clear which writers that Kayam has in mind, but it is likely that he particularly means Clifford Geertz whose work *Religion of Java* (1960) divided Javanese society into three groups including *priyayi*. Kayam’s point of view is still very relevant and

interesting because he approaches the issue from a literary perspective and as an insider of Javanese society.

This internal analysis of the world of *priyayi* in Indonesian society continues in *Jalan Menikung: Para Priyayi 2*, Kayam's second full length novel. As the title indicates, this novel is the sequel of *Para Priyayi* and tells about the third and fourth generation of Sastrodarsono's family, namely Harimurti, Tommi, Lantip, Eko and Bambang. Written at the end of the New Order era, 1999, the story is set in the heyday of the New Order when ideological debates were successfully mitigated and the interpretation of nationalism was the sole authority of the regime. This is the kind of nationalism which provided a more convincing and legitimating authority for the continuing dominance of an increasingly corrupt regime but which therefore also required the regime to control the notion of national identity and resist threats to its stability. These third and fourth generations of *priyayi* represent two sides of Indonesians in the New Order: those who thrive on the corrupt machinery of the New Order and those who are marginalized because of their idealism.

Other writings of Umar Kayam, especially his regular column in the *Kedaulatan Rakyat* daily newspaper, also indicate Kayam's postcolonial ambivalence. Two main characters are always present in his column: Pak Ageng, the master of the house, and Mr. Rigen, his servant. They are usually involved in a playful conversation related to contemporary issues and the daily problems of the common populace. In his introduction to the book in which the columns were republished, Mohamad Sobary notices the absence of any kind of master/slave dialectic in the relationship between Pak Ageng and Mr. Rigen. For Kayam, Sobary suggests, the unequal distribution of wealth is not a symptom of injustice but of harmony. *Priyayi* being served and servant serving is harmonious since that is cultural destiny. Sobary also observes that for Kayam, the two different classes should not try to annihilate each other but support each other in a symbiotic mutualism. Sobary puts it thus:

Untuk apa Ki Ageng menghadirkan potret masyarakat dua kelas macam itu? Mungkin untuk menggaris bawahi bahwa mereka bukan kekuatan-kekuatan yang harus bertarung satu sama lain untuk merebut posisi dalam sejarah sebagaimana Marx melihat relasi buruh-majikan. Bagi Ki Ageng, dua lapis masyarakat yang tak seimbang posisi sosial-ekonomi dan politiknya itu bukan tanda ketimpangan, bukan bukti antagonisme, melainkan sebaliknya: keselarasan. [...] Priyayi diladeni, abdi meladeni, itu selaras. Memang begitu takdir manusia dalam budaya. Lingkungan alam agraris Jawa yang menuntut serba keselarasan itu yang melahirkan tata hidup sosio-kultural yang juga harus serba selaras. (Sobary viii-ix)

Why does *Ki Ageng* [Umar Kayam] portray a society with those two classes? Perhaps it is to underline that the two classes are not opposing forces that have to fight for a position in history, the way Marx sees capital owners and workers are related. For *Ki Ageng*, the two Javanese classes, despite their unequal social, economic and political power, are not an evidence of antagonism but harmony. [...] The *priyayi* being served whereas the servant serves is harmonious. This is human cultural destiny. A Javanese agrarian environment demanding harmony has given birth to harmonious social life as well.

Such a world view is reminiscent of that paradigmatic and monstrous claim by the nineteenth-century western humanist, Ernest Renan:

1 Nature has made a race of workers, the Chinese race, who have wonderful manual dexterity and almost no sense of honor; govern them with justice, levying from

1
them, in return for the blessing of such a government, an ample allowance for the conquering race and they will be satisfied; a race of tillers of the soil, the Negro; treat him with kindness and humanity, and all will be as it should; a race of masters and soldiers, the European race. Reduce this noble race to working in the *ergastulum* like Negroes and Chinese, and they rebel. (Quoted in Césaire 38)

If such *view* has been repudiated by so many thinkers after Renan, especially by postcolonial theorists, how is it possible that similar view on the supremacy of the *priyayi* class is still upheld by a Javanese intellectual and novelist towards the end of the 20th century? How shall we explain the existence of the apparent false consciousness manifested in such a conformist attitude to colonialism and belief in class supremacy? What does this say about the impotence of Javanese culture in the face of colonialism in a novel written in the end of the twentieth century? The explanation probably can be found in Kayam himself. When asked about his response to criticism that his novels were more like sociological pieces than novels, he said that his background as a social scientist always haunted his creative process (Rahmanto 7). This dualism has resulted in fictions that look like a sociological piece relying rather heavily on the faithful rendering of a sociological depiction that does not necessarily reflect his personal take on the issue involved. On the one hand he sees the *priyayi* world as an insider but on the other he seems to want to observe some objective-scientific distance from the object observed.

This might be the explanation of the figuration of the collaborationist characters in his novels. There is a strong ethnographic element rather than literary one in Kayam's *priyayi* figuration with the result that the literary imagination, that which can go beyond what is real and critically questions what seems real, is not much developed there. As a result Kayam's latter stories look more like fictionalized ethnography in which a corrupt *priyayi* class is thriving despite their moral degeneracy.

Although Kayam claimed that his novel was a response to dissatisfaction towards Western theorizing about the Javanese social system, his stories seem to confirm Sutherland's observation that the master/slave dialectic in Java has been maintained by the *priyayi/wong cilik* relation, a relation that is, furthermore, heavily patriarchal. The only difference that Kayam suggests is that this oligarchic and patriarchal relation needs to be maintained in a humane way, unlike Sutherland's grim conclusion about the reality of the situation - that "the Javanese *priyajis* rule the peasants with a rod of iron" (Sutherland, p. 126). It must be very difficult for western thinkers who have distrusted the project of modernism to imagine that master/slave dialectics could form a symbiotic mutualism without any injustice involved. However, such is the dualism in Sastrodarsono and in Kayam's essays which indicates the postcolonial ambivalent position of the characters and writer.

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