

# INDONESIAN CRITICAL DISCOURSE AND ENGLISH LITERATURE: POSSIBLE RECONFIGURATION

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*The dominant concern of literary studies during the rest of the nineteen-eighties will be literary theory, Especially theory informed by the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida to gain insights into the cultures of blacks and women. (Kermode, 1990, p. 17)*

The prediction has been accomplished as we witnessed the domination of Post-structuralism in the Western academic discussion of theory in the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. No discussion of theory, such as Postcolonialism and Feminism, is sustainable without recourse to the insights derived from Post-structuralism. In this paper, I will present a postcolonial argument that Indonesian critical discourse has often intersected with issues burgeoning in the Western critical theory. I will centre on the three Indonesian historical events that have become critical postcolonially: *polemik kebudayaan* (culture polemics) in 1930s, *Lekra* (People's Culture Institute affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party, PKI) vs *Manikebu* (Cultural Manifesto) in 1960s and *sastra kontekstual* (contextual literature) in 1980s. These three historical phases are particularly relevant to our efforts to reconfigure English Literature in Indonesia and the possibilities for developing Indonesian literary criticism with critical theory awareness.

## 1. Polemik Kebudayaan: West versus East

*Polemik kebudayaan* (culture polemics) refers to the public argument among early Indonesian intellectuals about the future of Indonesian culture which took place in the literary journal *Pujangga Baru*.<sup>1</sup> The debate was incited by Soetan Takdir Alisjahbana's article "*Menuju Masyarakat dan Kebudayaan Baru*" (Towards a New Community and Culture) published in *Pujangga Baru* on 2 August 1935. Although *Pujangga Baru* was a literary periodical, the debate was laden with political nuances since the political atmosphere of the time was becoming tense with rising demands from Indonesian nationalists for self-government on the one hand and sterner colonial rule on the other.<sup>2</sup> In this article, Alisjahbana emphasizes the importance for Indonesians to separate the past, which he calls pre-Indonesia, from the present Indonesia. He criticizes the efforts to relate the formation of Indonesia in the 1930s with the local heroes fighting Dutch colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his argument, those figures fought for their local territories' independence and had no idea of Indonesia being comprised of these diverse regions. There is no guarantee if they had had a chance, they would not have invaded other regions because of their parochialism. To support his argument, Alisjahbana critically assesses the gigantic stone temple, Borobudur, a monument that has often been glorified as grand achievement of the past, as evidence of Javanese domestic colonialism in the form of the imposition of slavery by minority elites and the poverty that this entails (Teeuw, 1967, p. 37).

Alisjahbana does not find the past enlightening and in this respect his argument is not unlike a prominent thinker of early Postcolonial theory, Frantz Fanon, who also criticises past romanticisation by arguing that the colonizer will not be embarrassed simply by being shown some artefacts indicating that the colonized people were once a high achieving civilization. Fanon also believes that returning to the past in order to find some comfort from colonial degradation is utopian and unrealistic.

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<sup>1</sup> The articles on the subject were published in *Polemik Kebudayaan* (1948).

<sup>2</sup> Several political incidents around the period were the re-arrest of Soekarno in 1933, the Soetardjo petition asking for self-government, and the enforcement of the Restrictions on Rights of Assembly in 1934 by Dutch government (Foulcher, 1980, p. 21).

## 2. Liberal Humanism versus Social Realism

Indonesia proclaimed its independence from the Dutch on 17 August 1945 and gained full sovereignty in 31 December 1949. Five years after Indonesia proclaimed its independence, on 18 February 1950 Asrul Sani and his colleagues published a manifesto entitled “*Surat Kepercayaan*” (statement of beliefs) in *Gelombang* – “the literary section of the weekly magazine *Siasat*” (Nordholt, 2011, p. 6). This publication has been applauded as the evidence of Indonesians’ early determination to establish an outward looking stance by many.

Despite the affirmative and positive endorsement, however, the manifesto can be read as an indication of a major difficulty plaguing a postcolonial state’s cultural expectations and I see this publication as indicating another dubious space of Indonesian postcolonial identity – a theme that has been debated in culture polemics. The opening of the statement says, “*Kami adalah ahli waris yang sah dari kebudayaan dunia dan kebudayaan ini kami teruskan dengan cara kami sendiri*” (We are the true heirs of world culture and we must perpetuate this culture in our own way” (Foulcher, 1986, p. 3). The blunder occurs in not realizing that the so-called ‘world culture’ of the time was a Western construct that had relegated the rest of the world to the periphery. Given the fact that the Western construct of culture has given birth to worldwide colonialism, the *Gelombang*’s Statement of Beliefs sounds ironic. The history of colonialism put the Indonesians on the losing side. Claiming the culture giving birth to a system by which they had been oppressed as their own is certainly not enlightening. The *Gelombang* statement is true insofar as Indonesians inherited the *oppression* signified by the current notion of world culture. The determination to perpetuate the world culture ‘in our own way’ leads to further ironies since this can be interpreted as the commitment to perpetuate the culture of colonialism in the new state.

*Lekra* can be said to be on the other side of the “*Surat Kepercayaan*’s” stance. Established in 17 August 1950, *Lekra* aimed to ground culture, including literary production, on the social context, thus opposing the spirit of “*Surat Kepercayaan*” that frees culture from boundaries and rootedness. *Lekra*’s doctrines were summed up in two formulations: “*seni untuk rakyat*” (art for the people) and “*politik adalah panglima*” (politics is ‘the Commander-in-Chief’) (Yuliantri & Dahlan, 2008, p. 16). With these doctrines, *Lekra* stipulated that cultural productions had to be based on the social reality of the oppressed and ought to support the revolutionary spirit of the time. *Lekra*’s supporters believed that there was no place for a liberal humanist artist in times of revolution. These ideas were of course adopted from non-Indonesian thinking, namely that of Russian and other Communist literary intellectuals from the first half of the twentieth century.

Responding to *Lekra*’s increasingly aggressive stance, in September 1963 a group of poets and artists signed a manifesto called *Manifes Kebudayaan* (Cultural Manifesto) published in a literary magazine *Sastra*. This marked a renewed interest in the earlier liberal humanist thinking which emphasizes literature as an aesthetic, rather than social, product. Goenawan Mohamad, one of the signatories, recalled that they were fed up with the political atmosphere of the time and therefore

the document was a strategy for creating more room for independent artistic expression—free from the political pressure and ‘revolutionary’ rituals that characterised the early 1960s. (Mohamad, 2011, p. 3)

This insistence on personal and independent artistic expression characteristic of liberal humanism was seen by *Lekra* as a stance against the social realism that they advocated. Although both liberal humanism and social realism are derived from the West, those siding with *Lekra* considered social realism more appropriate for the Indonesian context and the Cultural Manifesto supporters were accused of supporting Western neo-colonialism.

## 3. Recasting the Ideological Commitment: *Sastra Kontekstual*

The *sastra kontekstual* debate of the 1980s was an attempt to move beyond liberal humanism and to place Indonesian literature once again within a fully Indonesian context. The term was coined by Ariel Heryanto at a seminar in Solo, Central Java in October 1984 (Heryanto, 1985, p. 4). Arief Budiman, a signatory of the Cultural Manifesto with a Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard, popularized the term and the arguments of *sastra kontekstual* through seminars and newspaper articles. Arief Budiman

encouraged literary value judgment which would not need to fit with the liberal humanist criteria set in the centre. He advocated a literary reading that combines aesthetics, sociology, economics and politics, especially in their relation to the local context or the periphery (Budiman, 1985, p. 350).

The arguments turned out to be very slippery because the concept of *sastra kontekstual* itself was unclear from the very beginning and has invited counter arguments from many cultural thinkers, including Umar Kayam who argues that Indonesian literature has always been contextual (Kayam, 1985, p. 236). Ariel Heryanto admits that *sastra kontekstual* does not have a rigorous definition (1985, p. 19). My own take is that the concept of *sastra kontekstual* becomes sharper as it develops and receives lots of critiques.<sup>3</sup> Several main concepts however can be outlined as follows. First of all it implies a criticism directed against what might be thought of as a 'liberal humanist' literary style -- which the proponents of *sastra kontekstual* call 'universal literature' -- that thrived during the New Order. The domination of liberal humanism in Indonesian literature after the demise of social realism since the second half of 1960s is considered by the proponents of *sastra kontekstual* as unhealthy. This unhealthy situation, they argue, has given birth to literature that is monotonous, uniform, and westernised (*kebarat-baratan*).

Secondly *sastra kontekstual* criticizes the liberal humanist literary establishment that has become some kind of Indonesian literary Supreme Court. If new literary works are to be accepted as a quality Indonesian literary works, they need to seek the approval of important figures from the literary establishment who hold key positions -- and who mostly live in Jakarta. The universal humanist literary critics in charge of literary columns in the mass media have become an important factor in determining the quality of new works. This situation might also explain why works considered having good literary qualities have always been published in Jakarta.

This invitation to revisit the relation between literature and politics might have reminded some survivors from *Lekra* of their manifesto advocating 'politics as 'the Commander-in-Chief.' However, Arief and Ariel do not advocate that doctrine at all. Rather they re-address the problematical relation between author and his social context that was also discussed by a few number of *Lekra* writers in the early 1960s. They argue that by orienting the standard of good literature on universal humanism they may have neglected local problems more pertinent for Indonesian peoples. One obvious result of such an outlook is an inferiority complex plaguing Indonesian writers for not being able to compete for international prizes and consequently desperate efforts to adopt Western literature in the hope of securing one.

Arief's suggestion about the need of a new literary approach is important. Although schools of literary theory such as Post-structuralism, Deconstruction, Postmodernism, Feminism, and Postcolonialism have been much discussed in the West, most Indonesians theorists still hold to what Foulcher says is "the conception of the writer as individual creative personality, whose works, correctly interpreted in the light of "Indonesian cultural values", speak to the universal human spirit" (1986, p. 12). The proposition of *sastra kontekstual* by Arief and Ariel can be said to be a reminder that the domination of a universal school of criticism and literary style might have made critics and writers oblivious to the plurality of representation and criticism. Ariel and Arief emphasise the importance of rethinking the ways in which both literature and criticism need to have historicist distinctiveness

#### **4. Toward the Reconfiguration of English Literature in the Indonesian Context**

Lessons learned: The development of critical discourse in Indonesia indicates the urge to recast traditional literary criticism to the more historicist approaches. It calls for the undoing of a two-fold extreme: the sterile approach reading only the aesthetic values (*Manikebu*), on the one hand, and simplistic base-superstructure relations/crude Marxism (*Lekra*), on the other. Secondly, the bypassing of proper literary methodology to universal and humanist conclusion advocated by *Manikebu* is not sustainable anymore in the face of theory. The development of theory inspired by Post-structuralism has shaken any comfort zone of theorizing position by questioning its own methodology and the underlying assumptions.

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<sup>3</sup> The arguments and counter-arguments of *sastra kontekstual* reflecting its initial concept and development are collected in Ariel Heryanto's *Perdebatan Sastra Kontekstual* (1985)

In this new paradigm, the teaching and reading of English Literature could sound distasteful: to make the colonized feel that they participate in the global movement of European civilizing mission. Postcolonial theory is a way of undoing this ideological residue and burden as well as opening up the possibility of including Indonesian works, especially those which have been translated into English. The method could be comparative (with other literature in English), otherwise it will be just another manifestation of Indonesian studies. However, comparative study involving translated works needs to be done with caution because we might be misled by untranslatable words unseen in the English version. If that is the case the comparative study “may turn out to be superficial because of shaky knowledge of local contexts and the specificities of cultural-historical differences” (Pope, 2002, p. 43). I believe that for the undergraduate level translated works are fine as long as the students are made aware of what might be lost in the translation process. In case of Indonesian translated works, Indonesian students even get the benefit of always being able to return to the original texts for accuracy.

This approach encourages the study of English literature that is not trans-historical but is always contextualised. This way of reading might involve the use of various theories such as Feminism, Cultural materialism, New historicism, Postcolonialism, Marxism, etc. all of which aim to ground the reading of a literary text to its historicity. The moment of high theory that tends to be too eclectic and very abstract has passed and it is high time to drive home theory to serve literary analysis. I could not agree more with Rob Pope mentioning that “there is now a growing concern with theory in practice, especially the politically and pedagogically urgent question of who learns and teaches what, how and why” (2002, p. 47).

The universities in the West respond to this challenge by shifting the focus: from English Studies to Literary Studies. Monash University does not host the School of English any longer but the School of Literary Studies incorporating former majors in English, Creative Writing, Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, as well as a number of language-specific literary studies. I do not think that Indonesia has to follow that move in the near future although we might want to reconsider this present decision with the changing time. We also do not have to follow the suggestion of Ngugi wa Thiong’o to abolish English Department in the universities. The English Department in Indonesia still needs to retain the Englishness – no matter how hotly contested its meaning is – firstly for practical reason of differentiating itself from the other departments of foreign languages (*Jurusan Sastra Perancis, Jurusan Sastra Jepang, Jurusan Sastra Rusia*, etc.) as well as the fact that English is still a selling subject in Indonesia, and secondly for the more ideological reason that we have understood this Englishness from the perspectives of current theory, especially postcolonial theory. The paradigm of English canon as an unshakable category that has to be in the curriculum of the Department of English is bygone orthodoxy and so is the traditional reading of literature (Liberal humanism and Hermeneutics – and even New Criticism and Practical Criticism). English Literature is worth studying as long as it is in its negotiation with literature of other languages in order to redefine its borders. The Teaching of English Literature with this new awareness helps to domesticate English Literature to serve local contexts.

This new paradigm might also help Indonesian literature gain wider circulation through its inclusion in the research projects and teaching materials. Teaching Indonesian Literature with critical theory will open up a world of interpretation quite different from the humanistic approach and reading Indonesian literature hand in hand with English literature will clarify how cultural surrogation<sup>4</sup> might take place in the world of literature across different nations.

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<sup>4</sup> any one performance functions as a surrogate for other performances (Roach, 1996, p. 2)

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