

Retnaningsih the Dreamer

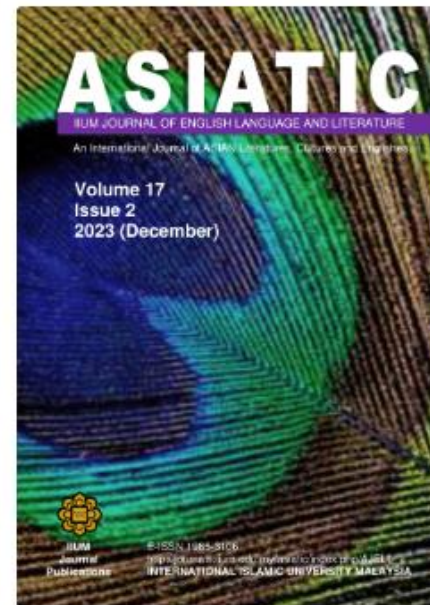
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ABSTRACT

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Retnaningsih the Dreamer

Rinto Andriono¹
Trans. Novita Dewi²

The ship I sailed on from Kuta Raja arrived in Batavia at the end of the 1901 rainy season. I had not chosen to make the journey, which seemed like traveling inside a coffin. For almost a month, I couldn't see the sun with my blurry eyes. When I lived in the forest, only sunlight could comfort me. I liked sunbathing and having my skin become as parched as the skin of a starving Nanggroe child whose parents were forced to work at the labour plantation, instead of growing their own food crops.

Without any sunlight on this ship, only the memory of Cut Gambang, my daughter, filled my heart. The Nanggroe forest was our blanket. Thistles kept us out of reach of the VOC's (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* [Dutch East India Company]) gunpowder. My heart aches when I think of my daughter roaming about the forest. She is still a pebble in the VOC's shoes. No mother would be content to imagine her daughter bathing in forest dew, swatting mosquitos, and resting leaning against the trunk of a *geulumpang*, a tall, shaded tree.

I could see the sun again now that I was at the Stadhuis van Batavia, the Batavia City Hall's prison. During recess, prisoners were free to walk the inner yard. The other prisoners were all male. I was the only female. The reason for our detention was just a matter of opinion. The VOC considered us rebels, and we looked at them as intruders who robbed our children's food. I don't think this was a matter of right or wrong, but more of differing points of view. The strong are capable of defeating the weak. It really is that simple.

All of this has frustrated me, Cut Nyak Dien, the wife of Teuku Umar, an Aceh warrior. Damn!

A flowering shrub in the backyard of the Stadhuis (City Hall) captivated me. The plant seemed to bear a very deep, almost bottomless sorrow. But the hope it provided was as wide as the horizon.

"This is the *wahyu tumurun*, the flower of revelation," another prisoner told me when we were allowed to leave our cells during recess.

¹ **Rinto Andriono** began writing in June 2018, after working as a post-disaster recovery planner. He survived a stroke caused by brain vessel blockage, paralysing his right side. Writing was recommended as a healing activity by his neurologist. During his post-stroke period, he focused on studies, online training, and writing on post-disaster mitigations. Among his works is the short story collection, *Kencan Hikikomori*. He passed away on 29 November 2021 at the age of 47.

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I sent him a sharp look—not out of anger, but because I wanted to remember his face. He was a man about ten years younger than I.

“I am Ilyas.” Detecting my curiosity, he added curtly, “My cell is on the second floor.”

“My name is Cut Nyak Dien. I come from Aceh.” I looked again at the three-coloured flower. It was blood red with a small fruit in the centre of the petals. The young flowers were yellow with yellow stamens and pistils on the tips. When I tried to touch the old petals, they were not as soft as they looked; they were stiff and sharp.

“The flower of rebellion!” I declared.

“A princess from the Javanese court supposedly planted it.” Ilyas said.

“Oh, someone from the court?”

“She was also a prisoner, along with her husband and their followers.”

On the second floor, I remembered the story of the Javanese princess. The native prisoners often talked about them. “What was she like?”

“The stretch of her fame was longer than the prison hallways,” Ilyas explained. “Her name was Retnaningsih; she was the wife of Prince Diponegoro.”

“The wife of a prince...,” I murmured.

I had heard the story of Prince Diponegoro from Teuku Umar, my husband. He told me that this prince was also involved in guerrilla fighting, which benefited the Yogyakarta Sultanate’s indigenous people. The people had put their trust in Prince Diponegoro’s leadership. However, he declined the Sultanate’s throne because it had sided with the Dutch. He chose to live as a farmer alongside his people, who were starving because they were subjected to the Dutch cultivation system, and he built resistance armies, using the Turks as an example.

My husband also knew the story of Prince Diponegoro’s defeat.

He told me that the prince had put too much trust in the good intentions of the VOC. Van den Bosch, the new Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies had overpowered the prince by tricking him to come to a negotiation meeting in Magelang, Central Java under a truce. The highly civilised prince would never lower himself to engage in treachery. However, such behaviour was to be expected from the VOC. They captured Prince Diponegoro upon arrival and treated him with less respect than one would give an outright criminal.

My husband refused to have the same fate. He racked his brains to escape. Deception begets deception. My husband pretended to make peace with the Dutch. After he earned their trust, my husband and his troops cleverly disappeared into the forest. He defected with fully armed, indigenous troops, who were tasked with arresting the Nanggroe rebels in the jungle. My husband’s manoeuvre infuriated the Dutch.

The prince's fate was different from my husband's. My husband's destiny was to become a martyr on the battlefield. The Diponegoro War (1825–1830) and the Aceh War (1873–1904) had impeded the Dutch's rule in the Indonesian archipelago and almost bankrupted the VOC. My fate was comparable to the prince's. Deception paralyzed both of us. Fortunately, my daughter had escaped and now continued our quest.

The native prison guards rang the bells. The echoes filled the air of the entire Stadhuis courtyard.

"Time is up!" A shouting prison guard brought my conversation with Ilyas to a halt.

We shuffled back into our cells. An image of Retnaningsih now kept company with the one of Cut Gambang in my head.

Retnaningsih. I tried to form an image of the woman. The story that my fellow prisoner Ilyas had told me about Retnaningsih was not enough to fill in the gaps. Every time I tried to compose a picture of Retnaningsih, the tricolored flower of rebellion appeared. Five petals. As far as I knew, five was an auspicious number in the East. Islam has five pillars.

Clank, clank. Clank, clank! I banged my aluminium plate against the iron prison bars to call Dasam and Karpan, my cell neighbours. "Dasam, why is the number five sacred?"

"Each of us is delivered into the world as one of five parts," he replied.

Karpan joined the conversation. "Yes, the first part is the amniotic fluid; the placenta is the second."

"Blood is the third part," Dasam continued, "and the umbilical cord that supplies us with nutrients from our mother while in her womb is the fourth part."

"Finally, we ourselves are the fifth part," Karpan concluded.

"We have to pay attention to the other four parts we are made of," Dasam advised.

"The four parts are our guardians in the world," Karpan added, "and prevent us from getting lost when we die."

"How do these four parts fit into our lives?" I asked.

"They manifest in our lust, our anger, our intellect, our conscience, and our spirit," Dasam answered.

During my childhood in Lampadang, Teungku Chik, my science teacher at the *dayah*, the Nanggroe children's boarding school, also said that the four elements of energy moved our spirit. When our spirit joins the four forces, the five parts of our being became a perfection that forms the human mind. Every

human being needs a correct dosage of these energies to live in this world. These four forces shape our hearts.

“First, there’s darkness,” said Teungku Chik. “This element of energy controls our animal instincts.”

“How dark is that, Teungku Chik?” I asked because when I was little, I was afraid of the dark.

“As dark black as a starless night,” he replied. “It happens when you forget your calling as a human being. Then comes the yellow light; this light is our lazy aptitude.”

“Lazy?”

“Lazy to study, lazy to try and struggle.”

“Then the third?”

“It’s the red one,” he said. “It is the power of anger, which can make you forget to be patient, but to some extent, it is needed to energeise life.”

“And the last one?”

“The white one is the desire for kindness,” said Teungku Chik. “When mixed in the right amount, all colors of light will be white like the sun.”

“Are there only four?”

“Add the spirit of the heart, and you’ll get to five, sweetheart.”

Back in my cell, my head spun wildly with the various images. Starting with the image of Cut Gambang, my daughter, followed by that of Retnaningsih, then the theory of the five petals, the five parts of us, and the five lights from Teungku Chik, the information presented in fives dizzied me. The presence of all five energies in my mind only intensified my prayers for Cut Gambang. And, being stranded in Batavia with no hope of returning home, I could only entrust Cut Gambang’s safety to the Almighty, Owner of all fives.

I woke up wearily on that cold morning of the 1903 dry season. In my dream, Cut Gambang and Retnaningsih roamed a burning forest. Suddenly, I found myself with them, and I felt the suffocating heat around us. I woke up gasping for air as they disappeared, along with my dream. I was engulfed by sadness and curiosity till noon.

The Jayakarta coastal wind that morning was awfully cold. Jayakarta, once prominent, now was merely Batavia’s past. Waiting for Ilyas, I felt the chill of the *limbubu*, strong wind, as it passed until it became a pleasant breeze. After getting to know each other better over the two years at the prison, Ilyas began to call me Ibu Perbu, the mother he could ask for advice. I did not have the same feeling. I was driven by my curiosity about Retnaningsih. I was eager to know more about her. I envied my own dreams.

“Do you know where the prince and his wife are now?” I asked Ilyas during our daily recess.

“The kitchen hand said they were banished to Bugis, on the island of Celebes,” he replied.

“Bugis, the kingdom of Gowa?” I mused. “That’s quite far; how far from Nanggroe will the Dutch take me?”

“The Dutch dispatched the prince’s troops throughout the archipelago,” Ilyas replied and continued. “Sentot Prawirodirjo, one of the prince’s commanders in chief, was expelled by the VOC to Minang, in the highlands of West Sumatra, to fight Tuanku Imam Bonjol, a famous religious Muslim leader whom the Dutch used to create a brother war in Sumatra.”

“Did the commander agree?” I asked sadly.

“After he engaged at the battlefield in Lintau, West Sumatra, Sentot figured out that he was fighting his own people.”

“What then?”

“He then helped the indigenous people he had previously fought under the orders of the VOC.”

“That’s the way it should be.”

“The prince and Retnaningsih were banished separately from his followers,” Ilyas said. “Kyai Maja, one of the prince’s confidants, was banished to Manado, a city in North Celebes, and the prince was exiled to the city of Makassar in South Celebes.”

Ilyas continued his story.

Prince Diponegoro was already sickly, seasick, and infected with malaria during his voyage to Celebes. His blood was as thick as the bitter *brotonwali*, a twig and root drink he drank to cure his fever.

In the midst of his suffering, Prince Diponegoro took the time to ask Knooerle, an aide to Governor General van den Bosch, “Is it your custom to exile a defeated leader?”

Knooerle had replied, “The case of Your Royal Highness is the same as that of Napoleon in Europe when he meddled with the power of other countries. He was exiled at the age of forty after losing the battle of Waterloo.”

“Is that the punishment for being defeated?”

“We don’t want you to imitate Napoleon, who, after being exiled to the nearby island of Elba, ran away to lead another war. Then, after losing again, he was exiled to the more distant island of Saint Helena.”

“My story might be sad, but maybe that’s what my soul needs,” the prince said curtly and continued eating the toast Banteng Wareng, his aide, had prepared.

“What? Your soul’s needs?” Knooerle had asked, confused.

Ilyas’s story silenced me. If the prince was moved from Magelang to Batavia, then moved again to Makassar for the sake of the VOC’s security, where

would they send me from here? After two years, I was still waiting for their decision regarding my exile. In essence, my spirit was not allowed to live in the minds of my people. The VOC did not want my story to ignite the fighting spirit of my people, whose minds were weakened.

Over the course of several recesses, Ilyas also told me the following:

Retnaningsih was exhausted while she and her husband sailed to their places of exile. At that time, in the middle of April 1830, the dry monsoon winds from the south gradually moved Retnaningsih and Prince Diponegoro's ship to the north. Retnaningsih watched the prince's suffering with wistful eyes. She alternately cooled and covered the prince when fever and malaria chills struck. The prince was only accompanied by Banteng Wareng, a midget servant who helped take care of all his needs. Thus was their suffering during the journey on a ship riding rolling waves across half of the archipelago. They sailed toward the Big Dipper.

Ilyas said that during that time, Retnaningsih was known to lament to God, "Is this the end of our struggle?"

"No," countered another persuasive voice that was always present whenever she complained to God. "This is not the end of our struggle." The outraged prince could not accept the Dutch betrayal in Magelang. Despite van den Bosch's treachery, the Governor General was still afraid of Prince Diponegoro's influence over his people. Van den Bosch didn't want to aggravate the prince. The strong are capable of defeating the weak.

On his way to exile, according to Ilyas, something happened to the mind of the prince, whose body was still weakened by seasickness and malaria. Between his intermittent sleep, he often talked about *mati sak jroning ngaurip*, a state of mind in which a person enters the realm of death consciously and deliberately while still alive. For the prince, this was the condition in which a person turned his back on his world, to prepare himself for a life after death.

Ilyas also said that Retnaningsih felt a shift in the prince's mind. One morning, Banteng Wareng could feel the glow of the embers in his mistress. Her tone sounded like the iron woman he once knew in a remote Javanese jungle. While preparing the *brotomali* potion to cure the prince's malaria, Retnaningsih asked, "Banteng Wareng, did you hear that the prince was delirious last night?"

"Yes, I did, Raden Ayu, My Lady."

Ilyas said that like Retnaningsih, Banteng Wareng felt that God had indirectly answered her question about whether this was the end of their struggle. This was not the end of the struggle! Even though they were now isolated, they were still faced with a more intrinsic struggle. They still had to restore their dignity. They were like soldiers who had just awakened from a long dream of humiliating defeat. Their dignity had to be reinstated. They knew they remained

fighters, even though they had no land. There was not an inch of land to protect, but, as the prince had always dreamed of, they still had an ounce of faith.

It was the struggle alongside the prince that made Banteng Wareng feel meaningful. Together with the prince, he dared to dream of liberating Java from the VOC's greed. The VOC had orphaned almost all the children in Java. Forced cultivation meant indigenous farmers did not have time to grow rice for their children, so the children were orphaned for lack of food.

Only in Tegalrejo, on the cultivation land that belonged to the prince, farmers could grow rice under his protection, which excused them from all forced cultivation obligations. In Tegalrejo, the farmers' rice harvest filled the children's stomachs. The royal palace, which should have been independent, was more occupied with counting the harvest of sugarcane milled under the control of the VOC.

Diponegoro had instilled the pride of helping others in the hearts of his people. Not only did his followers struggle alongside the prince to fight the VOC, they also fought for their own dignity.

For Banteng Wareng, a servant himself, being a down-to-earth prince was more noble than being a prince who lusted for power and seized the throne for himself. Banteng Wareng said that the prince had killed his desire for the luxury and power exhibited in the royal palace.

As the story went, the prince reportedly joined the Trustee Council to represent the then-young Crown Prince Hamengkubuwono V. The dishonest Prime Minister Patih Danureja IV managed the palace affairs with the Dutch Resident for Yogyakarta, A.H. Smisaert. When palace intrigue forced Prince Diponegoro out of the palace, he simply surrendered to the situation and roamed Central Java, from Selarong to Menoreh, while crawling from cave to cave for the sake of holding on to his belief.

I discovered that Retnaningsih was the driving force behind Prince Diponegoro's struggle from the bits of information I gathered while held captive in Batavia and Sumedang, a tiny town in West Java. A courageous war on the battlefield would not be successful without the tenacious patience and ingenious supply tactics of the native women, who had succeeded in utilising environmental resources around the Yogyakarta area. In Srandakan, they cooked the tough *manggar*, a coconut flower, to become *gudeg manggar*, a meal they provided for the formidable army. On the slopes of the Menoreh, they brewed crushed clove leaves into *wedang uwuh*, a traditional herbal drink that refreshed the rebels' spirits. The women soaked the poisonous rubbery into *growol*, the staple food that filled the

bellies of the soldiers back in Wates. During the fasting month, the troops that accompanied the prince for the negotiation meeting on Menoreh Hill had very little corn. However, lots of wild, spiky spinach grew in the area. Retnaningsih's able hands turned corn starch and spinach into *bubur leri*, a spicy, thick gruel.

Ilyas once told me about the following conversation between Retnaningsih and Banteng Wareng. "On this ship," Retnaningsih said, "we only have white bread pilfered from the company soldiers' rations. It is difficult to eat unless we grill it."

"Our stomachs are used to roasted cassava, Raden Ayu," said Banteng Wareng.

"The issue is not the type of food but our independence in planting and processing our food sources," Retnaningsih replied. She added, "Now, through forced cultivation, the VOC forces us to grow crops that sell well in Europe but we cannot eat. Cane sugar, coffee, tea, nutmeg, cloves, tobacco, and vanilla are easy to grow here, but they are not a part of our staple food," said Retnaningsih. She continued, "These crops are good commodities in Europe. It becomes difficult for us to eat because we are busy growing crops that the Europeans need, not what we can eat. It's useless to plant without freedom. We women really understand this problem, as we plant what our children can't eat."

"Yes, you're right, My Lady."

Supposedly, the harvest was transported to Europe via trade routes. The natives only became salaried aristocrats, not owners of their own land. They enjoyed their salaries as employees of the VOC.

According to the stories of the natives, the behaviour of the palace aristocrats was completely different from that of Prince Diponegoro, who tried to protect his people in Tegalrejo from the ramifications of forced cultivation. The people in Tegalrejo took pride in sharing rice, yams, sweet potatoes, and *ganyong*, an edible root, with their fellow natives who did not have enough to eat because of the forced cultivation. Thus, when Prince Diponegoro was expelled from Tegalrejo and had to roam from forest to hill, all residents felt honoured to serve their best food to the prince's entourage. They felt as if they were nourishing their own souls.

"Unfortunately, we have just harvested sugar cane," said Marsono, the *lurah*, village head, of Dekso where the prince and his troops rested at the height of the war in 1827. "We only have a little rice left from the harvest of the previous planting season."

"Do not worry," Retnaningsih said calmly, noticing the *lurah*'s nervousness with the arrival of the prince with some six hundred soldiers. "We will cook *benguke*, velvet beans."

"Yes, sure, Raden Ayu."

Ki Lurah and his residents then cut the itchy pods of the *benguk* plants that grew there in abundance. People were not used to consuming *benguk* at that time, but Retnaningsih started to cultivate *benguk*. Even the legumes, which are prickly to the touch before cooking, could be made into tempeh, which helped provide the daily nutritional needs of the troops. These cooking methods were later imitated by the residents when they faced widespread hunger due to the enforcement of the Cultivation System. It was through such a method that the prince earned people's wide support in his struggle. Thus, Retnaningsih had secretly raised the energy of the population that was weakened by starvation.

After my imprisonment in Batavia, I was sentenced to house arrest in Sumedang, a small city in West Java. It was cold during the rainy season in 1907. Maybe death will find me here. At the end of my life, my dreams of Retnaningsih became even more vivid. Now we seemed to be together in my dreams. We exchanged stories about the children we always missed. People around me often thought I was crazy because I talked to Retnaningsih in my dreams. To hell with what they thought! I liked my conversations with Retnaningsih. For me, an old, exiled woman in this strange land, dreams were the same as hopes that the VOC could never take away, even though they had taken away my freedom.

From the stories I had gathered, Retnaningsih was Prince Diponegoro's sixth wife. She was the daughter of Raden Tumenggung Sumaprawira, the Regent of Jipang Kepadhangan. It was her destiny to accompany the prince in exile in Batavia and Makassar. It was she who planted the shrub of rebellion in the inner courtyard of the Stadhuis.

"Why did you plant this flower, Your Highness?" I asked her once in a dream.

"At that time, my hope was high for the blessing of Gusti Allah."

"Does the shrub represent hope in God?"

"Yes, Cut Nyak Dien."

As far as I knew, the Javanese described a revelation as God's blessing on earth. I was lucky to have had the opportunity to see the shrub in the Stadhuis. It was very courageous of Retnaningsih to plant the shrub of hope in the tiger's den. The City Hall was the centre of lies and greed that betrayed her people, the centre of all deception, the place where I had been ensnared as well.

"Dear Cut Nyak Dien, have you ever longed to see your daughter?" Retnaningsih asked me in a dream.

“Of course, I really want to meet her safe and healthy but even if she were martyred like my husband, I still like to see her,” I lamented and added, “She continues our struggle.”

“Then, hurry up and catch up with us,” Retnaningsih said brusquely. I jerked awake from my sleep. I was irritated once more since I had not received any assurances about my expectations.
