

From the 1970s to the 1990s

'transgression', concepts of the body  
(Meredith Strickland)

Artists and  
Nukla Andia (Sara F. Williams)

Ideology and the  
of the body (Sara F. Williams)

Class and  
women performers contest gender (Sara F. Williams)

Nikola Andrić

The  
the birth and decline of a nation (Sara F. Williams)

Women  
Censorship and the body (Sara F. Williams)



*rima*



**rima**

**Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs**

**volume 41, number 2**

**2007**

The Association for the Publication of Indonesian and  
Malaysian Studies Inc. acknowledges  
generous support in many forms from  
The Australian National University and  
The University of New South Wales  
at the Australian Defence Force Academy

RIMA is published twice a year by the Association for the Publication of Indonesian and Malaysian Studies Inc. It is a fully refereed journal recognised by the Australian Research Council.

ISSN 0815-7251

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This issue of RIMA has been edited by Michael Bodden, Tineke Hellwig, Amrih Widodo, Jennifer Lindsay and Campbell Macknight.

Cover: From *namaku adam tanpa huruf kapital* 'my name is adam without capital letters'. See p. 194.

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The Secretary or macknight@ozemail.com.au  
APIMSI or p.tickell@adfa.edu.au  
GPO Box 1820  
Canberra ACT 2601 Australia

#### Subscription rates for each volume (two issues)

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Student	A\$35.00
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Institution	A\$60.00

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##### *Other countries*

Student	A\$45.00
Individual	A\$60.00
Institution	A\$70.00

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## Introduction

Michael Bodden and Tineke Hellwig

21 May 1998 marked the end of an era in Indonesian history: on that day President Soeharto announced his resignation. The circumstances had forced him to step down after thirty-two years. Indonesia, like other countries in East and Southeast Asia, had tumbled into an economic crisis in the second half of 1997 and dissatisfaction and frustration among the Indonesian population had led to street demonstrations and violence. In Jakarta, the days preceding Soeharto's resignation were 'full of high drama, nerve-racking suspense, and unexpected turns' (Suryakusuma 2004:3). When four students from Trisakti University were shot 'without any provocation' (Suryakusuma 2004:6), there was shock, anger and nation-wide mourning. The killings also set the stage for more riots, looting and anarchy, and increased pressure on Soeharto to abdicate. Under BJ Habibie's short term as President (May 1998–October 1999) Indonesia entered a period of *Reformasi* (reform) which ushered in more democratic institutions and more freedom of speech for writers, filmmakers, journalists, and the public at large.

One month before Soeharto's fall from power, in April 1998, a young and unknown woman writer, Ayu Utami (born 1968), published her first book *Saman*, with the subtitle 'fragment of the novel *Laila Does Not Get to New York*'.<sup>1</sup> She had submitted the manuscript (which, she says, she considered incomplete) to the Jakarta Arts Council Literary Contest (*Sayembara Roman Dewan Kesenian Jakarta*) and won the first prize. Immediately *Saman*, as well as its author, became topics of a heated public debate and sales figures skyrocketed.

The novel provides, on the one hand, an explicit socio-political critique of the oppressive and violent nature of the Soeharto regime, relating how *Saman*, a Catholic priest, stands side by side with South

Sumatran plantation workers in their struggle for social justice. The authorities respond to the workers' actions with intimidation, destruction of the village by fire and death threats. This story line advocates resistance to the New Order's omnipresent military power. The novel's publication in April 1998, in the midst of societal turmoil, political unrest and transition of power could not have been more timely.

On the other hand, the novel offers an emphatic celebration of female agency and sexuality. In order to achieve his goals, Saman receives support from four female friends: Yasmin, who acts as his lawyer and becomes his lover, Laila, Cok and Shakuntala. These four women are grappling with normative sexual identities and, in some cases, completely rejecting or reversing them. They repudiate the template of women as submissive wives and self-sacrificing, caring mothers. Ayu Utami not only presents these empowering images of autonomous women, she is also very candid in her sexual references. '[T]he author may be deliberately emphasizing sexual themes as a statement of womanly rights to self-expression in this domain, an assertion of identity and power' (Hatley 2002:174). As a result the author became a target for those who object to what they consider the immorality of the book's content and its 'vulgar' language. Moreover, she was accused of misrepresentation, that is, of having produced her bestseller only with the assistance of a prominent male colleague.<sup>2</sup>

With the publication of *Saman*, Ayu Utami shook Indonesia's literary world awake from its slumber. This novel seemed to articulate the anti-Soeharto sentiments that had long been fermenting under the surface. It represents the opening up of an unprecedented space for writers, artists and activists of various kinds to explore new horizons. Still, not everyone was equally enthusiastic about Utami's novel. Thus, the question remains why *Saman* was (and still is) considered a controversial piece of writing. Is it exclusively because the novelist dared to express liberated ideas of female sexuality in an outspoken (some would say blunt) way? This aspect of the novel is commented upon by critics and readers time and again, particularly in the Indonesian reviews. Yet, to what extent did the novel's critical commentary on the New Order and its human rights violations play a

role in its reception? The same question could be asked of the work of a number of the young women writers who followed Ayu Utami's meteoric rise on to the Indonesian literary scene. For example, Djenaer Maesa Ayu's fiction is often accused of the vulgar portrayal of sex and sexuality, but such discussions often sidestep or ignore other obvious features of her works like the consistent concern with abuse of women and children within the family, and the outrage with the imposition and social enforcement of normative gender identities in contemporary Indonesian society. Similarly, the concerns of other women writers with normative gender and sex roles, with being Indonesian in a global context, or with new paradigms of philosophy, psychology and spirituality, are often overlooked in heated public debates about 'pornography' and the aesthetic parameters of properly refined literature. Nonetheless, the writing of this dynamic group of young women writers and the theatre work of the playwrights and directors discussed in Barbara Hatley's contribution to this issue are helping to alter the public's perceptions of literature and performance, as well as to shift the parameters of public discussions of sex, gender and a number of other social issues.

What are the dimensions of these changes? In order to begin to understand aspects of these ongoing processes, this issue of *RIMA* presents seven critical essays on cultural transformations and literary developments, as well as analyses and interpretations of works of fiction and theatrical productions from the post-1998 period. Most of the papers were presented at conferences in 2005, others were written for this collection.<sup>3</sup> But before introducing the papers which follow, it is necessary to recapitulate some of the history of the New Order's pervasive attempts to control public expression, as well as the history of representations of women in New Order literature and culture, in order to understand why the recent writing and performance by women has had such an impact within current cultural production in Indonesia.

During the Soeharto years (1966–98) government control over the press and television, as well as other cultural production and the internet, was commonplace and writers, artists and journalists were routinely faced with (self-)censorship. During the 1970s the New

## Review

Joel S Kahn, *Other Malays Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*, Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with Singapore University Press and NIAS Press, 2006. (Southeast Asia Publication Series, pp. xxvi+228, tables, maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, index), \$50, paperback, ISBN 9971-69-334-8.

'Malayness' has been an important, if not central theme in Malay studies, and writers on this theme include Anthony Reid, Anthony Milner, Shamsul AB and Virginia Hooker. The latest Western contribution to the discourse on 'Malayness' is written against a personal historical background of the long-term ethnographic researches carried out by Joel S Kahn and Maila Stevens in Rembau, Negeri Sembilan during the mid 1970s and subsequently.

The theme is by no means exhausted, for it evolved into this book devoted to Malay modernisation after Kahn posed the question about how much concepts of 'Malayness' had been shaped by nationalist discourse and nation-building projects in the last thirty years, and how much ideas had already begun to take shape in the early 1920s, and continued into the ten years after Independence. Kahn focuses on the effects of change upon the economy in the forty years between the early 1920s and the early 1950s, changes which take place within a 'transnational space', finding that village life, once quintessentially Malay, has almost disappeared. He theorises that this is not only a result of the New Economic Policy following on the 1969 race riots, but also attendant on the process of change fuelled by events in the late colonial period.

A new set of problems has emerged. Colonial discourse and nationalist narratives, the texts upon which much existing constructive work on the modern Malay identity is based, have both obscured, erased or silenced other narratives, so that existing definitions are contested by both the postcolonial theorists and the anthropologists

who seek to recover them. Encountered throughout Malaysian society among the Malay community are 'high levels' of racism, patriarchy and exclusion. They are here interpreted as a consequence of the hegemony of a nationalist narrative of an original, indigenous race of Malays which was marginalised by colonisation and subsequently rescued by a postcolonial state which guaranteed Malay rights. The effect was to marginalise the rights of other Malaysians — among them the Chinese and Indians, the indigenous orang Asli, the tribal groups of Sabah and Sarawak, women and others — in the course of creating modern Malaysia.

Kahn originally intended to add to existing research and to award a place to the racially excluded, so creating a more inclusive and cosmopolitan Malaysia. He found, however, that alternatives to the nationalist narrative did not exist as fully formed alternatives and that dissenting voices, which were not being awarded a full hearing, had their place. They too, were authorial constructs, and were not the unmediated voices of the subaltern groups, of which such texts may claim to speak. He went in search of alternative constructions and in the course of this, he found some interesting new trends.

Who are the new Malays? Selecting Singapore as his research base, chosen because it had served as the site of much of the construction of Malay identity from the 1930s to the 1950s, Kahn found that this site served to shift the focus of his study of Malayness to include a new cosmopolitanism. The Malay nationalist narrative has described as 'Malay' a diverse Southeast Asian population which ill-fitted the stereotype of the Malay in colonial and nationalist narratives.

Kahn sought out the 'other Malays' in Singapore. Among such Malays, he found a successful, cosmopolitan, English-speaking businessman, domiciled in Terengganu, visiting a relative in Singapore, but still retaining family links with West Sumatra. Kahn also found a new willingness among immigrant groups in Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia to identify themselves as descendants from places like Java, Minangkabau or Sumatera, and who in so doing, constructed alternative narratives to the narrow and exclusive definition of Malayness which is currently acknowledged. The

behaviour of these immigrant Malay groups towards Kahn was strikingly different from that of the non-immigrant Malays whom he had earlier encountered in Negeri Sembilan, who had been incurious about Minangkabau, reputedly their own land of origin, when Kahn had mentioned his former residency there.

These later immigrant Malays asked Kahn about his experiences in their former lands and discussed what he had to say. In addition to this, they demonstrated a new willingness to criticise non-immigrant Malays, characterising them as complacent, narrow-minded, boorish and lacking in the capacity to mix with either immigrant-Malays or non-Muslim Malaysians. These immigrant Malays did not follow the stereotypical profile of the Malay which had had been constructed in earlier times. They were not village-dwelling agriculturalists, living at subsistence level, but might now be urbanised, sometimes wealthy, commercial merchants. They were not fatalistic or superstitious and many subscribed to modernist interpretations of Islam of Middle-Eastern origin.

Kahn maintains that neglecting or suppressing this other world in the formation of Malay nationhood has serious consequences, citing Paul Kratoska and Firdaus Haji Abdullah as historians of colonial Malaya who have also looked for alternative histories of the creation of the Malay. A new construct of Malayness has emerged, as well as a new construct of the other-Malays, born elsewhere, retaining family links, speaking something other than Malay as a first language, above all, cosmopolitan, possessing an openness towards things and people which did not exist in earlier constructs. It posits a rediscovery of non-Malayan roots in the current generation of peninsular Malays with ancestors born outside the peninsula; in short, alternative narratives of Malayness are being told. These alternative narratives include the former Melayu Raya and Watan Melayu constructs, incorporating the significance of Islam.

There are in fact, precedents in the historical record, still existing in collective memory, for a greater inclusiveness to be acknowledged. The journalists, musicians and composers, film directors and film actors in Singapore Malay's history came of immigrant Malay stock. Singapore Malays are more often than not of

Arab, Indian, Sumatran or Chinese descent. There are indications that Malayness is no longer the sole or primary category of identity in diverse places in the Peninsula.

Kahn widened his originally planned study of the ways in which the national narrative of Malayness developed, to include the ways in which the immigrant Malay has contributed to Malay history. The existing 'exclusive and racially exclusionary narrative' suppresses, but does not completely extinguish other identities and narratives. Can the answer to Malaysia's 'racial dilemma' be found in anti-racist practice, or can it be found by broadening the category of Malayness to include the suppressed narrative of cosmopolitan Malayness? Read this important book.

Christine Campbell  
Australian National University