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Review of Rejection: A Sumatran Odyssey

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Ashadi Siregar. *Rejection: A Sumatran Odyssey*.
Translated by Jennifer Lindsay.
Penguin Random House SEA, 2022. 400 pp.

The readers of Ashadi Siregar are led deep into the primeval jungle of North Sumatra this time, instead of the typical urban setting found in the celebrated writer's campus novels. *Rejection: A Sumatran Odyssey* follows the life of Tondinihuta, or Tondi, a former bus conductor, who becomes part of a rebel army opposing Sukarno's central government. As he sets off on a long journey to deliver a letter from his battalion commander to their top command in Bukittinggi, a sacred path unfolds, and Tondi is pulled into the myths and memories of the Batak heartland.

Originally published in Indonesian as *Menolak Ayah*, this novel is Siregar's first work to be translated into English. Translated by Jennifer Lindsay, *Rejection* introduces English-speaking readers to Siregar's exploration of Batak culture and Indonesia's post-independence struggles.

Tondi's epic journey is told in five parts that invite the reader to draw complex connections between the men and women of his *marga*, or clan. Although the narration shifts from past to present—and on occasion, in perspective, focalizing Tondi's mother, for instance—the novel can be read in two linear and parallel progressions of time: one traces Tondi's 25-day trek through the forests of Pusuk Buhit, and the

other chronicles Tondi's life from his birth to his early years of boyhood spent under the care of his *Ompu Silangit* and *Ompongboru*, to his years in Siantar with his mother, and finally to his coming into manhood, dramatized through a sensual meeting with a beautiful woman named Habibah at the back of the bus, and with Longgom, whom he meets when he stops at a coffee plantation in the jungle. And it is here, after Tondi leaves Longgom with his medallion, and returns to his long march, that these two motions of time, magically, converge. What is being chronicled is now Tondi's present. In fact, it is already his future.

Jungle as Queering Time and Space

When he arrives in Sipirok, he meets a group of armed men under someone named Bagio, who tells Tondi he can no longer continue to Bukittinggi. It turns out that it is already February 1959, which means a year and a half have somehow passed since Tondi left their camp in Toba territory in July 1957. But how? While walking the jungles, he has disappeared from the ongoing war for more than half a year. His platoon commander has been shot dead. The letter he is carrying is now useless. What is our hero, whose journey is now considered pointless and pathless, going to do?

To answer this, Siregar leads us, through Tondi, into the deeply fantastic traditions of the Batak.

With the dagger *Ompu Silangit* gave him, the bamboo flute from *Ompu Bulung*, and an *ulos* cloth, Tondi performs a ritual he had only witnessed before as a boy: "I have to find out what happened to me. I want to martonggo" (182). Tondi speaks the ancient Batak, "the mantra he had once read in a *pustaha*" (184), and calls the forest spirits to ask about his whereabouts, and why they wanted to keep him in their kingdom. The answer comes via Masrul, one of the members of Bagio's army whom the spirits choose as a medium. Tondi finds out that he spent months in the home of the spirits in the jungle. Everything that

happened to him was real; it is just that, “Life in the midst of the Toba jungle is short but long in its stretch of human time” (187).

This connection between Tondi and Masrul is one of the more striking decisions the author makes in the story. As it stands, *Rejection* is a novel about Indonesia’s political history, and the tensions between Tondi and his *marga* and the Batak cultural legacy. But Siregar delivers a surprising turn in Masrul, a character Tondi meets during this part of his life that he spends in Bagio’s army. He and Masrul share details about their life with each other. Masrul tells Tondi about his wife, who turns out to be Habibah, the woman with whom Tondi had his first sexual experience, the woman he still dreams of. They share many moments together: walking together, bathing together, sleeping under the same shelter, and during the cold nights in the jungle, embracing each other. Here he discovers his affection for Masrul. After sharing each other’s warmth, Tondi discovers he has stopped longing for Habibah. Reckoning with his feelings for Masrul, he wonders, “Can both a husband and wife become a man’s lover?” (201)

This turn toward queerness can be seen as unexpected, when one regards the story through the lens of war as a masculine enterprise. However, it can also be understood as a natural extension of the queering Siregar has already performed on the novel’s treatment of time, where Tondi’s walk in the jungle stretches into a year and a half, and on Tondi himself, whose perception of his identity is challenged by his closeness with Masrul during their time in the middle of the Toba jungle. The jungle then becomes a queer space, outside the orderly, patriarchal, state-centered temporalities of cities like Siantar and Sidempuan. Here, in the intimacy of Bagio’s army, Tondi is distanced from his *marga* and the dominant scripts of Batak male honor and power.

Yet the queer space the two find is still vulnerable. The war is ongoing and, while on a mission in the city, Tondi and Masrul are captured, then separated. The jungle’s suspension of time and identity collapses as the weight of the city’s surveillance and violence hits them

in the face. Tondi remains captive, but through his ingenuity, he finds himself earning the favor of his own captor, Colonel Sunarya. Eventually, the two collaborate on a transport business in Jakarta, while Tondi profits on the side through a prostitution ring for his powerful clients. Years pass. Tondi is a transformed man. At one point, he even orders physical abuse on one of their drivers who stole the car that belonged to the company. “That was a management lesson, Tondi-style” (255). This signals Tondi’s reentry into the violent heteropatriarchal norms shaped by war and lineage.

Gender in *Rejection*

The novel attempts to justify this power and authority as part of traditional Batak culture, where the patrilineal system privileges male lineage and social leadership, and masculinity is closely tied to a man’s ability to maintain and extend the honor of his *marga*. In part five of the novel, we see a wealthy and powerful Tondi driving around, plucking the vulnerable out of poverty and giving them all the money they need for a better life. He saves the sick and emaciated Masrul, gives him and Habibah a house, a job, and once he discovers that Habibah’s son is his, he adopts him and makes him part of his *marga*. He also finds Longgom, by then a prostitute, who has a son, the fruit of that night with Tondi years ago, when she was “sore, frightened, confused, uncertain and overcome with other undetermined feelings” (113). Lastly, in the final scene of the story, Tondi also finds the wife and daughters of his estranged father, Pardomotua. After his arrest, the girls who had been raised in luxury now live in poverty. Tondi offers his help, “I’m helping you not because you are my father’s daughters, but because you are my grandfather’s granddaughters” (310).

Siregar takes great care in portraying the male characters of his story: the wisdom of Ompu Silangit; the complexity of Pardomotua, absent father to Tondi and useless husband to Halia, but in a touching

scene, depicted with grace as he meets Tondi at Ompu Silangit's grave, the day before he is to be arrested after Sukarno's fall; the queerness of Masrul and his relationship with Tondi; and the growth of Tondi into a man who finally becomes materially able to save all the battered, prostituted, and exhausted women around him. But does saving the female characters in the novel restore justice, or does it merely reinforce Tondi's own power and self-image?

While *Rejection* succeeds in depicting and preserving the rich heritage of Batak myths and letters, the novel falters in its troubling and sometimes even undignified treatment of women. Rarely do the female characters emerge as full subjects. They are mostly depicted as child-bearers—like Halia, Tondi's own mother, who only ever sees her body as “fertile soil that had been prepared by Batak custom for just this purpose” (137). The savagery enacted upon them is transformed as opportunity for the men's redemption—Longgom's traumatic night has been ambiguously recast, lightly, as the work of “Boraspati, the dragon god and guardian of the earth's belly” (114), and then later as familial restoration, for Tondi's *marga*. We never see what happens to her after that night. The next time she appears, she is working as a prostitute, her body frail “like a wilted banana leaf” (291). Their futures are offered up to the men—Masrul, in a poignant scene near the end, bathes and dresses up his wife, Habibah, after coming out to her as a homosexual, and then sends her off to Tondi, “I would like her to be with you. She's still young. She still needs it” (285). The queer man erases himself while the woman remains nothing more than a fertile field. Time is normative. And the man is unshaken in his power as the planting stick.

In an interview with Penguin SEA, when asked what the novel is all about, Siregar says it is about father and son, and that is true. The novel vividly explores the complex relationship between father and son across three generations. A boy growing into manhood during a turbulent political moment in Indonesia is common fare across his other works. Here in *Rejection*, there is an attempt at rupture, seen

especially in its gesture toward queering time. But its gender politics remain tethered to the old order. The novel ends with Tondi erasing his father—“that man had gone, swallowed by the past” (310)—and this is where the novel ultimately lets go of the potential its women are ready to offer up to their author: it could have been powerful if it were Halia, the wife, Tondi’s mother, who bears the power in the erasure. In the end, then, Tondi’s odyssey ends up following the same path that has historically sidelined marginalized women’s agency in Indonesia’s socio-political imaginaries.

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