

1-28-2013

Contemporary Indonesian Poetry A Heap of Ashes

Susan Evangelista

Follow this and additional works at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/phstudies>

Recommended Citation

Evangelista, Susan (2013) "Contemporary Indonesian Poetry A Heap of Ashes," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*: Vol. 27: No. 1, Article 16.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13185/2244-1638.3978>

Available at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/phstudies/vol27/iss1/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Ateneo Journals at Archium Ateneo. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints by an authorized editor of Archium Ateneo.

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

Contemporary Indonesian Poetry A Heap of Ashes

Review Author: Susan Evangelista

Philippine Studies vol. 27, no. 1 (1979) 119–122

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

up abstractions in curriculum development and teacher education drawn from a rich ground of an individual experience. *A Philippine Rural School: Its Cultural Dimension* is a commendable addition to any educator's professional book collection and to any school of education library.

Aida C. Caluag

CONTEMPORARY INDONESIAN POETRY: POEMS IN BAHASA INDONESIA AND ENGLISH. Edited and translated by Harry Aveling (Asian and Pacific Writing 5) St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1975. xxiii, 261 pages. Cloth \$10.95 / paper \$4.95.

A HEAP OF ASHES. By Ananta Toer Pramoedya. Edited and translated by Harry Aveling (Asian and Pacific Writing 6) St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1975. xxii, 193 pages. Cloth \$10.95 / paper \$4.95.

These two volumes are number five and six of the Asian and Pacific Writing series edited by Harry Aveling for the University of Queensland Press, the same series that recently published a collection of Nick Joaquin stories under the title *Tropical Gothic*. Taken together the two serve as an excellent introduction to modern Indonesian literature as both Toer's socio-historical fiction of the forties and the fifties, and the much more individualistic, private poetry of seven poets from the sixties and the seventies, are perfectly representative of their times.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer is probably the leading fiction writer of the "Generation of '45," the generation that simultaneously worked out a cultural identity and fought for political independence in the forties. This is the group that originated modern Indonesian literature, and their work was, not surprisingly, highly political. Toer was imprisoned several times by the Dutch, and then actually fought with the Nationalists against the Police Action of 1949. In the Post-Independence Era, he was a member of LEKRA, a Communist-inspired organization that aimed to bring about social education and change through the medium of mass literature.

But the movement eventually grew stale, and what had been inspiration degenerated to a restrictive line, under Sukarno's "Guided Democracy." Toer, still a powerful writer, moved a bit further to the left. In 1965 Sukarno was overthrown, the military took over, and arrested tens of thousands of suspected Communist supporters, Toer among them. Toer was and is still imprisoned in the jungle island of Buru, off the coast of Ambon in the Moluccas.

That was the end of political literature, but it had served its purpose, and perhaps even outlived its time. Strangely enough, military rule seems to have

ushered in a new era of literary freedom, a new blooming of individualistic, non-political writing. The imprisonment of the more socially oriented "Generation of '45" served to release new writers from the old influence, and the era of poetry based on "The people, heroism, social dignity, and the inevitability of history was over" (Harry Aveling, introduction to Contemporary Indonesian Poetry, p. xvii). The volume of poetry, then, is representative of this later stage of Indonesian writing.

Ananta Toer's work is no longer available in Indonesia, and actually very little of it has been translated. So Harry Aveling's new translations are most welcome, perhaps to social historians even more importantly than to literary critics, for Toer's work is more valuable for its social commentary than for its literary merit. It is socio-political in orientation, but it is not partisan; it is not propaganda. The times were truly chaotic ones: a national independence movement of increasing strength was cut short (and yet still encouraged) by the Japanese occupation; the Japanese trained the troops who were later to fight against both Indonesian Communists and the Dutch who attempted to reimpose colonial control in a series of post-war "police actions." The fighting between the Communists and the Nationalists was perhaps the most bitter, for it was Indonesian against Indonesian. The moral ambiguity of the times is clear in Toer's writing, especially in such stories as "The Vanquished" in which one particular family is completely torn apart by the political events of the day: the father is a Nationalist and works for the new government, but the Communists take over the village and win the allegiance of one of the daughters. Another daughter is forced to join the Communists, who have by then arrested the father. In a particularly macabre scene, the prison burns down, and yet another daughter races to the scene, only to find and bring home a leg which she is sure belonged to her father. Later the Nationalist *siliwangi* troops reoccupy the village and burn the family house down because they have "harbored" Communists. In this particular story the people are clearly on the side of the Nationalists, although the Communists are sympathetically treated. It is very difficult to separate side from side, or to say who is right and who is wrong. But the chaos of the times comes through.

The following story is called "No Night Market," and deals with Toer's return to his native village, Blora, for the final sickness and subsequent death of his father. The father had been an idealist and had fought for Indonesian national independence, but once independence had been achieved, he was appalled by the corruption and moral disintegration that followed, and it was this corruption that killed him.

And yet Toer seems to be saying that one must function in society, taking the good with the bad and making one's own contributions. There can be no self-realization outside of society, and it is in the context of living as a social activity that an old Chinese gambler makes the lament that in death one has to go alone, because it is not like a night market.

The stories in this book seem to parallel Toer's own political and psychological development. Most of them are personal narratives, concerned with his own family, in the context of the socio-political events of the times. The first two deal with his childhood and with his father's part in the growing Nationalist movement, but they are told from a child's point of view, and with childlike simplicity. The two following stories are the two already described: they deal with the problems that followed Independence at the end of World War II. They are not particularly hopeful stories, as they center on the decay that followed the war. "Silence at Life's Noon," the final story, is another story of emptiness and loss of purpose, again personal but also socio-historical.

But out of this silence and decay came first, the military take-over, and then the new poets. Their writing is no longer political — it is personal — but it is still social, as it describes the loss and ennui of the modern Indonesian intellectual. Rendra's poetry is particularly grim and iconoclastic. In one long poem called "The Sermon," Rendra, a Christian, describes a horrible scene in which one priest refuses to give a sermon, but manages to agitate the crowd until they turn into jackals and devour him. In another poem a prostitute who is dying of syphilis meets Jesus Christ on a riverbank (after a Catholic priest has refused her any aid) and he makes love to her.

The woman poet Toeti Heraty writes moving but very controlled lyrical verse about simple things: new love, dying love, the death of a child, age, sorrow, lack of communication. In a marvelous poem called "Government Department" she contrasts the dryness of the dust-covered tables and the lives of men who go from meeting to seminar and back again with the freshness of youth and love. She is probably the most sensitive and subtle of the poets in this collection. But her poetry is extremely private, as indeed all this poetry is, for even when some of it seems to be social criticism, it is so from a very personal point of view.

One might say that the poetry here is universal, certainly more so than Toer's fiction, for these poets are sophisticated, partially westernized (at least two of the seven have lived abroad for long periods), and they write of alienation and the ills of modern society, religion now divorced from life, love destroyed by poverty, isolated individuals, people who cannot communicate. (This is what we call "universal," yet I wonder what meaning these themes would have for the approximately one hundred million peasants of Indonesia.) Humanists, people who are interested in literature that translates well and actually seems to speak across cultures, will doubtless find this the more interesting of the two books, and the poetry is probably of greater literary merit. But for people who are primarily interested in Indonesian history and society, for people who want to know about the common people of Indonesia and how they have reacted to their recent past, Toer offers more. Both books are valuable — we can only hope that more of

the very rich literature of Indonesia will be translated soon — but they are valuable for different reasons.

Susan Evangelista

UPDATED CHECKLIST OF FILIPINIANA AT VALLADOLID. Compiled by Isacio R. Rodríguez, O.S.A., 2 vols. Manila: National Historical Institute, 1976. xiv, 836 pages.

The term “updated” in the title of this welcome two-volume checklist of one of the most extensive existing collections of Filipiniana, particularly of rare books, is in reference to the earlier *A Catalog of Filipiniana at Valladolid* edited in 1973 by Helen R. Tubangi, and published by the Ateneo de Manila University Press. As Professor Tubangi noted in her preface to that volume, it was based on a listing obtained by the late Dr. Domingo Abella (in 1956). After some years (and numerous vicissitudes referred to by Fr. Isacio Rodríguez both in the prologue to these two volumes and in his foreword to the Ateneo Press volume), a copy of the initial listing was given by Dr. Abella through the late Fr. Horacio de la Costa to the Ateneo History Department to be prepared for publication. It was realized at the time that the listing was not complete, but in view of the fact that further verification and completion was impossible at the time, due to reconstruction of the Valladolid Library, it was decided to go ahead with the long-delayed publication, “and perhaps later put out a supplementary volume if necessary.” For reasons too complicated to be detailed here, Fr. Rodríguez’s much more complete compilation appears here under the auspices of the NHI, recasting and integrating the Ateneo Press volume entries with a very substantial number of additions.

The complex history of the publication of both the Ateneo volume and the NHI volumes has led to an unfortunate misunderstanding, expressed in Fr. Rodríguez’s prologue, where he states that “I believe it was a breach of professionalism on [Professor Tubangi’s] part to omit in the publication the name of the compiler of the catalogue.” (p. xiii), i.e., Fr. Rodríguez himself, who was responsible not only for the listing on which the two volumes under review are based, but also for the original listing for the Ateneo catalog. In view of the facts of the transmission of that listing, as appear from the correspondence of the late Fr. de la Costa, and from my own conversations with the late Dr. Abella and Professor Tubangi, as I recently communicated them to Fr. Rodríguez, he authorized me personally to make the proper rectification in this review. The omission of Fr. Rodríguez’s name as compiler of the Ateneo edition was due to the fact that Professor Tubangi, as well as others of us in the Ateneo History Department, were not aware that it had been the work of Fr. Rodríguez.