



Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.



Dorothea Rosa Herliany at Frankfurt Book Fair on 15 October 2015



Darkness surrounds us in the Indonesian Pavilion when a small man enters the stage. Humbleness surrounds him, a quietness that betrays his presence on stage.

Afrizal Malna is one of the most important Indonesian poets and one of many guests invited to present Indonesia as the guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair this year.

Malna's journey to poetry was an unlikely one and his struggle as a poet is also a struggle to find his roots, his identity and – his mother tongue.

On the map, Indonesia looks like a huge, tropical swarm of fish that got lost between Asia and Australia. A country that boasts 700 ethnic groups, five official religions and a myriad of natural religions, even more colours, forms and scents, is an unlikely place to become one nation.

Indonesia is a literary treasure trove. The many different cultures and languages have produced different literatures, some orally transmitted but also a dozen

written literatures. Some of them, like the Javanese literature, have traditions spanning a thousand years. The interesting question is how such an unlikely nation can build a national literature. The slogan 'Unity in Diversity' is part of the *Pancasila*, the official state doctrine, and feels like a continuous call for nation building.

Indonesia gained independence in 1945 after many centuries of being colonised, mostly by the Dutch. To advance nation building a new language was introduced. Bahasa Indonesia, the new language that was introduced shortly after independence, derived from Malay, the language of commerce in this area of the world for centuries.

The Indonesians affectionately call their language *Bahasa*, which means 'the language', and there are statues to honour the language and literature event emphasises the importance of *Bahasa* in the forming of a national literature.

Poetry is the most popular form in modern Indonesian literature. Readings and performance often attract hundreds

of listeners. The secret of its success lies in its entertainment value, as pathos and music play a major role. Physicality plays a major role in the performance of poetry.

While oral forms are doing well, printed forms are struggling. The literacy rate is higher than 90% but books are too expensive for the majority of the population, which totals up to 250 million. Andre Hirata's novel *The Rainbow Troops* has been the most successful book so far and sold no more than five million copies.

also an act of sacrifice to serve their nation best in leaving the past behind and with it, the words to express their inner self.

So Afrizal Malna never learnt his mother's tongue and, though growing up with Bahasa Indonesia, he has always been very conscious about the limitations and ambiguities of language. Malna has doubts in language, and he elevates working on and with language to make it his strongest weapon to repeatedly question Indonesia's long journey into modernism, which is accompanied by social and political rejections.

His is an appellative poetry to be interpreted. A poetry that is splintered and unending at the same time, a poetry that looks directly at the fragmented present-day society of contemporary Indonesia.

Afrizal Malna calls the Indonesian language a language without a native country. President Suharto's New Order doctrine of the mid-1960s aimed to shape a united nation but also resulted in the destruction of land and the uprooting of those who could not find a place in it... According to Malna, the Indonesian language famously resists all forms of domestication. This makes him search for a Bahasa Indonesia that is able to reflect the neglected history of his native country with its dispossessed peoples. It is crucial to him to work out these losses and negations with its new common language that on the other hand is still a major construction site. Therefore his poems remain outraged statements against his country's intolerable social and political conditions. They denounce the widespread lack of work and perspective, denounce the rampant corruption and the government's 'dead-body politics'. Environmental destruction and daily violence matter to Malna: 'People are being raped. The land is being raped. The earth is being raped.'

Malna transformed his language into an extremely flexible body, one that puts up a fight against bureaucratisation and despotism, against over-shaping and uniformity, against dogmas and banning: 'Young people know their bodies are unnumbered ice blocks. They melt in order to hump. They melt in order to scavenge a job. They melt in order to buy shoes. And they become ice blocks again. They become ice blocks in order to melt. They become ice blocks in order to enter the house. They become ice blocks in order to go to school. They freeze and melt like the water shoved into the freezer' (from: *The Active Activities of Ice Blocks*).

Afrizal Malna is one example of the literary diversity that tells us about the fierce fight for excavating the traditions of this unlikely island nation, tells us of the many victims the modern state has claimed. Indonesian literature offers us an image of a faraway region, where extremes are clashing like nowhere else in the world. CF