

# Modern library of Indonesia

The following books have been published by the Lontar Foundation.  
All reviews supplied by Niels Mulder.

## Oblation to status

### Reviewed publication:

Rusmini, O. 2011. *Earth Dance*. Jakarta: The Lontar Foundation, 162 pages, ISBN 9789798083822

OKA RUSMINI'S *Earth Dance* brought to mind the time of my early experiences in Southeast Asia when I had difficulty in understanding – let alone correctly acting in – a hierarchising social environment. During my first year, at the dignified Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, my teachers despaired whether they would ever succeed in instilling a modicum of appropriate language and manners in this blunt, egalitarian Dutchman. When being called up for military service, I was confronted with a system where a man is his rank, where he is a uniform with insignia. That lesson, however, didn't sink in; after six months, they sent me home. Ten years later, my Thai teachers tried to do a better job than the drill sergeants, and four years hence it was the turn of my Javanese mentors ... Reluctantly, I gradually learned that in Thai or Javanese social life a person is a rank, that rank obliges; one has to live up to it, and display it to boot. Deep down, one may be different and even disagree. That is a private affair that should not disturb the social show.<sup>1</sup>

Oka Rusmini's tale is set in Balinese society and dwells on the preoccupations of four generations of women who are hemmed in by caste, tradition, taboos and, naturally, by gender ideas. Through highlighting these limitations, and the escape routes of excelling in the gracefulness of dancing, of being beautiful, and of marrying a high-caste husband, Balinese realities come into sight that are far divorced from the overload of myths that colours the view of outsiders.

The possibilities of 'escaping' are very limited, and so many characters are goaded to resort to alternative ways of 'self-expression, such as jealousy, backbiting, derision, intrigue, and even migration to the anonymity and freedom of life in the city.

In order to bring the story's main theme out in sharp relief, one of the main characters, highborn Telaga, pursues her dream of marrying her childhood love Wayan, a gifted painter and, much more important, a lowly commoner (*sudra*). This opens the gates of hell! Was her life already controlled by her mother's avarice, she now added the unrelenting bitterness of her mother-in-law and the greed of her sister-in-law. A noble woman marrying beneath her station is an insult to the good order, is breaking taboo, and inviting the wrath of super nature, which is confirmed by Wayan's death after only a few years of marriage. In order to prevent further disaster, Telaga is persuaded to still go through the ritual of exiting from her high status and of becoming a real *sudra*.

Next to this, we still find a *sudra* woman who was successful in marrying into a *brahmana* household which, consequently, opens the sluices of resentment at her very presence there. With these examples, the message becomes – for women as well as for men – that caste binds and divides, that hierarchy obliges and sets people apart.

Bali – a nice place? Touristy, spectacular, an Orientalist fantasy. Life on Bali? Hidden from the foreign gaze, we are confronted with anything but an idyll. This is the merit of Oka Rusmini's insider story. As a Jakarta-born (1967) Balinese, she knows what she is writing about.

*Earth Dance* was first published in 2000; it earned the author a literary achievement award from the Department of Education. It was translated into English by Rani Amboyo and Thomas M. Hunter, and then commented upon in an Afterword by Pamela Allen. The present edition appeared in the Modern Library of Indonesia series of The Lontar Foundation. The book carries a well-thought-out Glossary, even as I would have appreciated glosses on the meaning of always recurring Balinese first names/titles, such as Oka, Putu, Wayan, etc.

## Condemned to each other

### Reviewed publication:

Farid, Lily Yulianti. 2010. *Family Room*, Jakarta: The Lontar Foundation, 149 pages, ISBN 9789798083808

THE MAIN THEME of Farid's *Family Room*, that is, 'who are we vis-à-vis each other?' reminded me of Sartre's play *Huis clos* ('closed shutters') in which it is clear that we are inescapably condemned to each other. In such bondage, we find torture and the relief of laughter, loneliness and love, abandonment and the inevitable confrontation with ourselves.

Lily Farid's particular celebration of *La condition humaine* or 'man's fate' is sometimes set in out-of-the-way locations, but most pertinently in contemporary Indonesia with anti-Chinese

rioting and looting, with the gunfire of guerrilla attacks, and interreligious violence in the Moluccas. Even so, violence is not the privilege of the surrounding world outside, but looms in the very family room that has been booby trapped with mines and into which family members throw sticks of dynamite. Next to the familiar reaction of people sticking to themselves behind the closed doors and shutters of their privacy, we find the violence against the integrity of the individual, personified in, on the one hand, the pervasive corruption of the servants of government and their concomitant abuse of privilege, and, on the other, the corrupting influence of social climbing.

The holy cow of reputation, of what is being said and thought about oneself and one's family, with, in tandem, obscurantism and hypocrisy, all get their due in settings that strike as a run-away up-to-date style of life, with unwanted pregnancies, drugs and overdose, consumerism, and the abuse of those who do not enjoy the privilege of money and status. No wonder that the author's satires on political subjects are sour and cynical, and that her comments on life – or the absence of it – in the family room have a sense of bitterness and anger. The family room with its endless bickering and blatant egocentrism – also of mothers and fathers – is not a nice place to be. So, it comes as no surprise that the only intimate relations depicted are between a girl child /woman and her nanny, and between a grown-up daughter of a first marriage and her youngish step-grandmother.

With family members, as a rule, being out of reach of each other, the author created the space for unexpected and often amazingly powerful stirs of emotion. Another stratagem is her infusion of a mild streak of schizophrenia; people may be willy-nilly dependent on themselves, but they live with the voices of their alter-egos. Maybe it is the little girl of yore that keeps talking to the grown-up protagonist or commenting on her adult way of life and preoccupations, and maybe it is the voices of former relations or even television characters ('Daddy in the box').

*Family Room* is an anthology of short stories chosen from two collections of Farid's work plus a few, at the time, unpublished stories. As a publication that appeared in the Lontar 'Modern Library of Indonesia', they have been translated by John H. McGlynn, and provided with an introduction by Melani Budianta. As it stands, the work teems with unexpected insights and sketches, and may be somewhat bewildering for those who know the country from before the days it was fully exposed to the exigencies of economic growth and the vagaries of modern life. The picture it paints is not inviting; the way the author does it, however, is innovative and refreshing. I look forward to reading more of her.

## New York stories

### Reviewed publication:

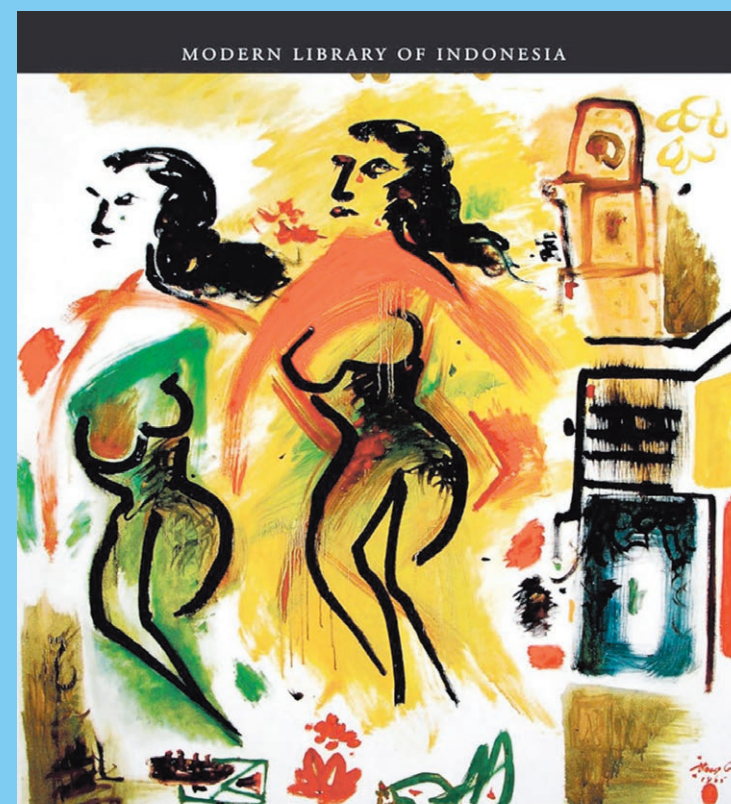
Kayam, U. 2012. *Fireflies in Manhattan*, Jakarta: The Lontar Foundation, 200 pages, ISBN 9789798083846

FROM HIS RETURN FROM CORNELL in the ominous year 1965 until his demise in 2002, Umar Kayam, or UK as his wife tenderly recalls him in her Introductions, was one of the towering figures on the Indonesian cultural scene, even as it lasted up to the publication of *Seribu Kunang-kunang di Manhattan* with Pustaka Jaya in 1972, before he also established his name as a short-story writer.

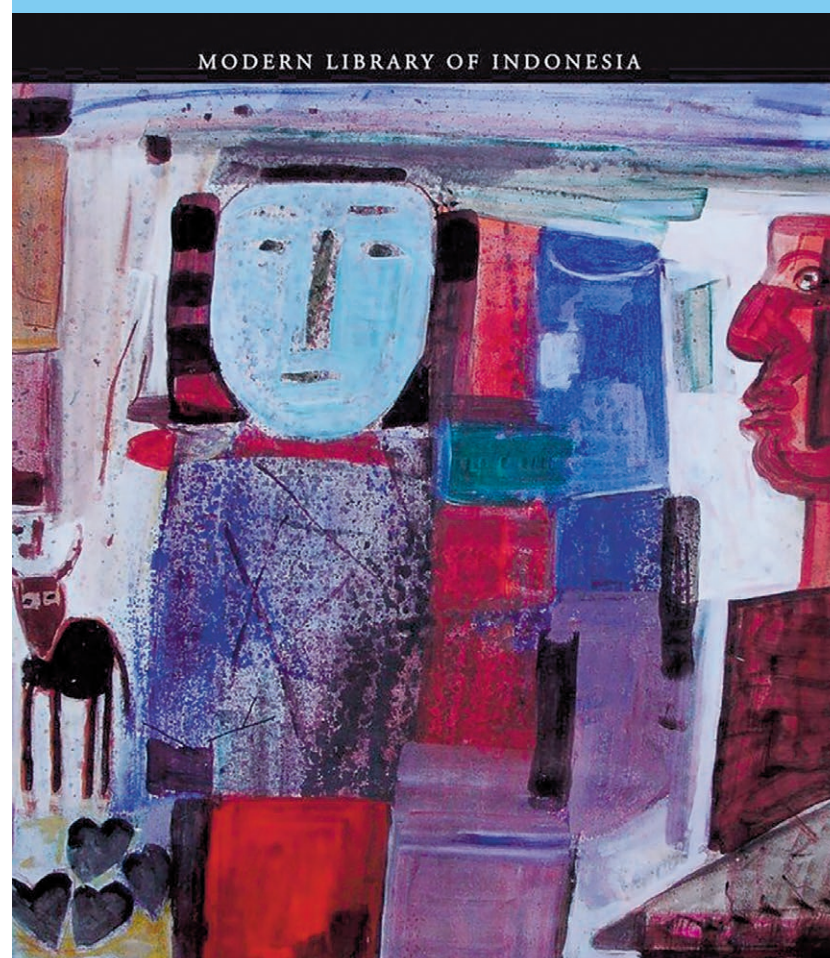
The present collection of his stories divides into three parts that coincide with separate creative periods, of which in the first two – New York and 1965 – he deals with the challenges posed by living as a naïve and relatively isolated Indonesian graduate student of New York University in the big-city American environment, and then with the challenge of dealing with the incredible realities of massacre, fanaticism, incarceration and persecution. The third part, Lebaran, is set in the familiar circumstances of the festive yet hectic *Idul Fitri* or Lebaran holiday – comparable to the Christmas season in Christian countries – celebrating the end of the yearly fasting month of Ramadan.

The light and semi-ironic tone UK's New-York stories combines with a mood of loneliness. In contrast to the sociability of Javanese life, his New-York characters are generally loners or feel themselves to be alone, and are fighting their own individual problems. Even as this may reflect his and his wife's feelings of living in the midst of a concrete and steel jungle, the sketches of life in that environment strike as true to life and are always spiced with humour and refreshing amazement.

As may be expected, the tone set in the period of the anti-Communist pogroms of 1965-66 is entirely different from the light irony of the New-York stories. The three stories that



Oka Rusmini  
*Earth Dance*



Lily Yulianti Farid  
*Family Room*



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Umar Kayam  
Fireflies in Manhattan

comprise the second part focus on individuals and their plight in a world gone out of balance. It is through the experience of personal crises that UK manages to grasp the ambience of what people and country went through. Interestingly, the three rather lengthy narratives also offer lots of deep insights in Javanese mentality and how it changes with the times.

It is this quality they share with the Lebaran stories. In the tone UK sets in dealing with 'things Javanese' vibrates his love for and fascination with the wisdom former generations went by and that will hopefully – albeit in different forms – endure as guidelines for individual comportment in these times that offer little to personally hold on to. During my own research on Javanese mentality and civilisation, I was privileged that UK regularly resided at the university housing complex of Bulaksumur in Jogjakarta where, from time to time, I took the liberty of disturbing him with my questions that he gracefully endured.

UK was a gifted teacher, which shines through in the open-ended way he concludes many of his stories, in that way leaving it to the reader's imagination to chew the cud. It is a wonderful and stimulating way of storytelling which draws the reader into the scene.

The introductions to the three parts give a generous share of biographical and professional information; they trace his careers as a civil servant and author. In the first, a poignant picture is drawn of the life of short-kept students in the early 1960s in the inhospitable climate of New York – far different from the imagination shaped by Hollywood movies. Upon coming back to Jakarta, the couple's circumstances in run-down Indonesia were not much better, while they were soon to be engulfed in the madness of the times, such as the collapse of Sukarno's reign, the extermination of 'Communists', and the rise of General Suharto.

Arts Council in 1977; later, in 1984, it was still named recipient of the Pegasus Prize, a literary award sponsored by Mobil Oil Indonesia. *Dan Perang pun Usai* also drew foreign attention, as it already appeared in 1986 as *And the War is Over* in a translation by John H. McGlynn (Louisiana State University Press). The Lontar Foundation's edition – here reviewed – contains McGlynn's revised translation, and appeared in the Foundation's 'Modern Library of Indonesia' series that is devoted to introducing Indonesia to the world through literary translations.

## Life's course in lyrics

### Reviewed publication:

Djoko Damono, Sapardi. 2012 (rev. ed.). *Before Dawn*, Jakarta: The Lontar Foundation, 172 pages, ISBN: 9786029144185

AS A JACK-OF-ALL-LITERARY TRADES – as essayist, short-story writer, translator, and poet – Sapardi Djoko Damono is best known as Indonesia's foremost lyricist whose career meanwhile spans five decades of published work. It is the first four of these that are reflected in this collection of some 135 poems (1961-2001). The poetry is presented in chronological order, so yielding glimpses of a life in lyrics from young man to the loneliness of old age and of having been through it all. In other words, the subject matter of the collection is the experience of life.

It is an existential exploration of "who are you, who am I?" that unfolds in amazingly effective language, touching on life's salient points, clarifying them as it were while making them accessible to others. A very effective device to do just that, is that the poet is never alone but always accompanied by "something walking besides you". It is a soliloquy, and at the same time an internal dialogue between an ego and its alter.

The poet's versatility is impressive, as he is able to draw powerful pictures with a minimum of words to a palette of poems, which a glance appear to be prose. The poem *Distance* (p. 40) may give an idea of the minimalist:

*and Adam came down to the forest  
to disappear in myth  
and suddenly we are here, gazing  
at the sky: empty and still ...*

Whereas *Meditation* (p. 116) is a short-hand illustration of Sapardi's singing lyrics that sometimes seem to be prose:

*Do not disturb: I, the paladin, am meditating  
in a cave, an egg or a word – is there in fact a  
difference? And at some point in time when  
roots have encircled me and I, a seed, have  
found meaning – will you, my friend, have the  
courage to approach?*

Some pieces of the latter *genre* may run up to eight pages, of which I particularly like Sapardi's observations on old age, such as the seven-page piece *What's the News Today, Den Sastro?* and the more conventionally composed title song, *Before Dawn*. I find these pieces attractive because they delve into the experience of my own, old-old life.

Whatever this layman opines is, of course, not very relevant, even as I am impressed by the images Sapardi evokes in my mind. Upon receiving his fourth literary award, the Achmad Bakrie Award for Literature (2003), the jury observed, "Sapardi's work is a perfect example of how the creative writer is able to rejuvenate language through the process of creating his own personal style" and as such he provided evidence that he has inherited the mantles of both Chairil Anwar and Amir Hamzah, two of modern Indonesian poetry's most eminent practitioners (p. xi).

These observations were concluded with, "Poetry gives life to language and the successful poet, through his linguistic skill and discipline, is capable not only of changing his readers' view of the world, but also giving shape to the world itself. Sapardi, through his poetry, invites us to engage in the freedom to do so in the most basic sense: to give birth to a new reality by reflecting upon and grappling with that most basic cultural element of language."

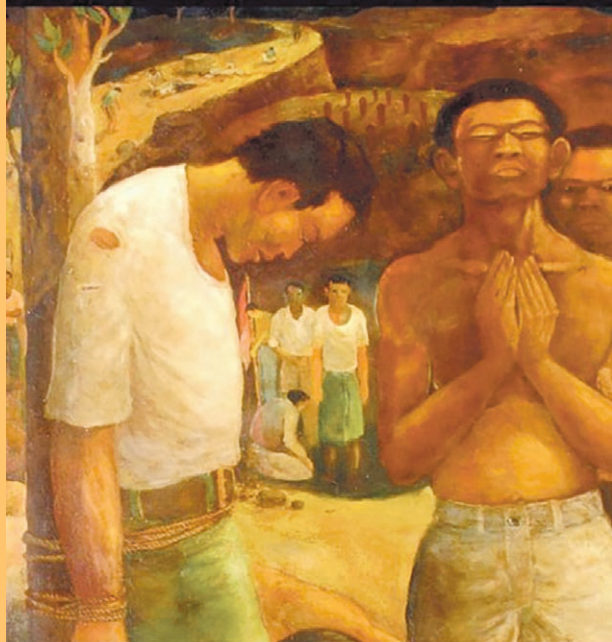
We still should compliment the skill of the translator John H. McGlynn who, over the past thirty-five years has done much to bring Indonesian literature to readers world-wide. The fact that he could even tackle poetry in a fascinating way attests to his mastery.

**Niels Mulder retired to the southern slope of the mystically potent Mt. Banáhaw, Philippines, where he concluded his swan song, *Situating Filipino Civilisation in Southeast Asia; Reflections and observations*, Saarbruecken: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing (print-to-order ed., ISBN 978-3-659-13083-0) 2012. (niels\_mulder201935@yahoo.com.ph)**

### Notes

1 See 'The Crux is the Skin; Reflections on Southeast-Asian Personhood', in Mulder, N. 2012. *Situating Filipino Civilisation in Southeast Asia; Reflections and observations*.

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Ismail Marahimin  
And the War is Over

## Crazy times

### Reviewed publication:

Marahimin, I. 2011. *And the War is Over*, Jakarta: The Lontar Foundation, 189 pages, ISBN 9789798083761

WHEN, IN THE LATE 1960S, I set out to do my first fieldwork among the Javanese of Jogjakarta, I was struck by the reference to the period they were under Dutch rule as the *zaman normal* or the time of normality. The Japanese invasion of 1942 announces the turn of the wheel of time: the Dutch East Indies cease to exist, and country and people enter the turmoil of the *zamanédanor* – crazy times. During such periods the righteous will suffer while rascals will rise and rule in a world turned topsy-turvy. The Dutch are interned and forced to labour under arbitrary Japanese, and may have to fill the bathtubs of their mistresses who formerly served the white masters.

During my first time on Mid-Java many people doubted whether the coming of Independence heralded normalcy. Under Sukarno's whimsical rule, they were fed slogans rather than rice, and the massacres that marked the end of his 'guided democracy' were still fresh in mind; even to the point that some who had participated in them told me nervously giggling their stories. Would his successor – an eminent product of the crazy times, rising from a colonial non-com to the very apex of the nation – augur a period of order?

*And the War is Over* is set in the final days of World War II in a small village in Northern Sumatra where the Imperial Armed Forces have established a prisoner-of-war camp for Dutch internees and a site for a group of Javanese forced labourers, the so-called *romusha*. It is a time rife with rumour and short on solid information, even as internees and the Javanese are totally in the dark. Unaware of what is going on, a group of Dutchmen plans and prepares for their escape into the jungle for which they need the cooperation of some influential locals. An exceptional *romusha* – generally these are mistrusted and looked down upon by the local population – is about to propose the daughter of a prestigious haji. Some Japanese surmise that the United States has finally capitulated, as others commit suicide in the expectation that their out bombed country is about to surrender.

As much as the narrative has an exceptional *romusha*, it also presents us with various leading and a crowd of ordinary villagers, willing-to-flee and staying-on Dutchmen, successful mistresses and whores, a humane Japanese officer and hard-line non-coms and soldiers, and the reasoning of wandering *Minangkabau* (West-Sumatran) merchants. All of these play their part in ephemeral settings that change by the day – and that, as such, evoke flashbacks of life in Japan, in the Minang heartland, and in the *normal* Indies – while giving the author ample scope to narrate a complex story in relatively few pages. In order to add particular flavour to the variety of nations and customs, a modicum of Javanese, Minang, Arabic (Muslim), Dutch and Japanese words and expressions occur in the body of the text, next to a considerable number of specific Malay-Indonesian nouns that had better be left un-translated; they are explained in a six-page 'Glossary' at the end of the narrative.

Ismail Marahimin's first and only novel was an immediate success as it was nominated the best of the year by the Jakarta

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Sapardi Djoko Damono  
Before Dawn