

SENO GUMIRA AJIDARMA: CONSCIENCE OF THE PEOPLE

Born in 1958 in Boston, Seno Gumira Ajidarma has been writing fiction since the age of sixteen and began working as a journalist when he was nineteen. He is now one of Indonesia's most well-known and most prolific writers: as Michael Bodden puts it, 'Seno's work is literally everywhere.'¹ He won the Southeast Asia Write Award in 1997, and in the same year his short story anthology *Eyewitness*, translated by Jan Lingard, won the (Australian) Dinny O'Hearn Prize for Literary Translation.

In New Order Indonesia, however, Seno often wrote at the risk of being censored because of the sensitivity of the issues he addressed in many of his short stories - in particular military violence in East Timor, which is at the core of the stories in *Eyewitness* and in his 1996 novel *Jazz, Parfum dan Insiden (Jazz, Perfume and an Incident)*. He has also written stories about the so-called 'mysterious killings' in East Java in the early 1980s, and about Aceh (most chillingly in a 1999 story called 'Telpon dari Aceh', 'Telephone call from Aceh'). Seno's credo is 'When journalism is silenced, literature must speak. Because while journalism speaks with facts, literature speaks with the truth.'²

Seno's journalistic style, and the topical and controversial nature of the issues he covers – a recent example is his story 'Clara', about a Chinese woman who was raped in the violent attacks on Chinese-Indonesians in May 1998³ – mean that he is difficult to categorise as a writer. This is compounded by the fact that his writing style oscillates between realism, fantasy and reportage, often, in the best tradition of postmodernism, incorporating a variety of styles within one work. When quizzed by students at a 2001 seminar about whether he is a journalist, a short story writer, a poet or a political commentator, and about whether his work is surrealism, magic realism, fantasy or postmodernist journalism, he gave the enigmatic reply, 'Call it whatever you want. It's what I do.'⁴

¹ Michael H. Bodden 'Seno Gumira Ajidarma and fictional resistance to an authoritarian state in 1990s Indonesia,' *Indonesia* 68, October 1999 p.154

² Ketika jurnalisme dibungkam, sastra harus bicara. Karena bila jurnalisme bicara dengan fakta, sastra bicara dengan kebenaran.

Seno Gumira Ajidarma, *Ketika jurnalisme dibungkam sastra harus bicara*, Yogyakarta: Yayasan Benteng Budaya: 1997, p.1

³ See Michael Bodden's translation of this story in *Indonesia* 68, October 1999 p.157-163

⁴ 'A fiction of facts: Seno Gumira Ajidarma', *Latitudes* March 2001 p.60.

His response was equally non-committal when asked about the ‘meaning’ of the story translated here, ‘Destination: The land of the neverending sunset.’⁵ The symbolism of the date on which the story was written - 17 August, Indonesian Independence day – and the year – 1998, three months after the fall of Suharto – combined with Seno’s penchant for couching serious political commentary within fantastical narratives, makes it tempting to regard the story as an allegory. Seno himself suggested, ‘It’s the reader who makes the meaning out of a story, isn’t it?’⁶, adding ‘If someone wanted to read it as simply a fairy story, then s/he would be a happy person.’⁷

Political allegory or charming fairy story? Pessimistic tale about the elusiveness of happiness or optimistic yarn about the possibility of eternal bliss? Seno won’t give the answer; we as readers must ‘make the meaning’ for ourselves.

⁵ The story ‘Tujuan : Negeri Senja’ was first published in *Kompas*, 8 November 1998, and has since been included in Seno’s collection *Iblis tidak pernah mati* (Yogyakarta: Galang press, 1999). It was also included in *Kompas*’s collection of the best stories of 1999 (*Derabat Jakarta: Kompas*, 1999).

⁶ pembermaknaan yang dilakukan oleh sang pembaca dong, ya kan?

Personal correspondence 5.6.02

⁷ kalau ada yang menerimanya sebagai "dongeng saja" maka dia orang yang bahagia.

Personal correspondence 5.6.02

DESTINATION: THE LAND OF NEVERENDING SUNSET⁸
Seno Gumira Ajidarma

There's a special ticket booth at Tugu railway station in Yogyakarta. You can't buy tickets to Jakarta or Bandung or Surabaya there. It's set apart from the other booths, and never has many customers, even though in this period of crisis train is the preferred form of transport, despite the high cost of tickets. (What choice does one have anyway: compared to the exorbitant - insane even - price of an airline ticket, the cost of an {albeit expensive} train ticket seems like chicken feed.) Passengers who've just arrived from Jakarta line up straight away to get their return ticket – even if they're not planning to travel for another week. You can guarantee that tickets for weekend travel will be sold out a week in advance. There are always long queues outside those ticket booths.

So it's very strange that this one ticket booth is always quiet. This particular booth only sells tickets to one destination: The Land of Neverending Sunset.

A train heading for The Land of Neverending Sunset duly arrives every evening. But there's never a train coming from The Land of Neverending Sunset.

'The people who go to The Land of Neverending Sunset never come back,' the ticketmaster explains. So people who buy tickets for The Land of Neverending Sunset have already decided they'll never return.

I'm stunned. How could this be?

But everyone at Tugu station has accepted this fact. I've only just found out about it because until now I've always flown back and forth between Jakarta and Yogya. Every evening a train heading for The Land of Neverending Sunset appears. The silver train, flashing and sparkling like a royal carriage from some mystery kingdom, suddenly emerges from the direction of the Code River. It's not a diesel train, just an ordinary chugging locomotive, but it's utterly captivating. Its carriages seem to be straight out of fairytale land. Not just because of that glittering silveriness, but because when we look through the windows we glimpse an extraordinary world. Laid out inside the carriages is a self-contained natural realm. A grassy field and a tranquil lake, complete with swimming geese cleaving its surface. Horses that emerge from a valley and gallop up the hillsides. A tropical forest wet with the aroma of moss and the melody of birdsong. We can even see an underwater world: blue, dark, deep, with fish radiating a luminous glow.

⁸ I would like to express my thanks to Michael Bodden for his careful reading of my translation of this

Yet hardly anyone at Tugu station ever climbs aboard those carriages, despite the fantastic charms of the attractive stewardess who waits at the door, her hair and body perpetually exuding the fragrances of the night. The children frolicking in the fields or the playground occasionally run up to press their faces against the window, and gaze out at the people at Tugu station, but soon they scurry off again.

The train only stops for five minutes, then it's on its way again. It comes every evening and invariably stops, whether or not there are any passengers. The stewardesses step off and wait at the door; if there are no passengers the train departs after the whistled signal from the guard, leaving in its wake a billowing cloud of smoke. The train's shrill wail is still audible even after it's disappeared from sight.

I see the Land of Neverending Sunset train every time I catch the *Senja* train from Jakarta to Yogya and back. Who would want to leave and not come back? Obviously from time to time someone did. Never very many, five at the most. Sometimes there would only be one or two. And even though they were leaving for good, they never took much luggage.

'How much does a ticket cost?'

'Oh, there's no charge.'

'You mean...?'

'All that's required at this ticket booth is a signature.'

'What sort of a signature?'

'A signature declaring that they agree never to return.'

'And if they change their mind, and decide they want to come back?'

'That's not possible, and it never happens.'

'What's this Land of Neverending Sunset like?'

'Nobody has ever been able to find out.'

'Well when they built the railroad, where did it go to?'

'Oh, those tracks have been there since before the station was built. There are no written records about their construction, and nobody has ever been able to find out anything.'

'That's strange.'

‘Ah, everybody here is used to it. You’re the only one who’s ever bothered to ask about it.’

‘That’s weird, how can you get used to people never coming back.’

‘What’s weird about it? It’s just like death, isn’t it. What’s weird about death?’

Is this really how things were? Was it really pointless for us to puzzle over something or to question something, simply because we would never be able to understand it? Take death, now death is something that really is shrouded in mystery. But as for the train, couldn’t one follow it and then come back?

‘What if I were to sign the form, but all I wanted to do was to have a look at The Land of Neverending Sunset, then come back?’

‘No problem, as long as you’re prepared for the possibility of never returning.’

‘What if I were to escape?’

‘Go ahead, give it a try.’

Did I have the guts to do it? I was always on the move, going from one place to another. But I always came back. When I set off I always knew I would be coming back. In fact the reason I could go was because I always knew I would be coming back. But to go and never return?

‘What’s it like there, then?’

‘For crying out loud, how would I know?’

By now I was overcome by curiosity. I would scrutinise the passengers very carefully every time the train came into the station. Their faces were indeed a picture of resignation. The resignation of people who have prepared themselves to go somewhere without imagining the possibility of returning. From time to time a whole family would get on, as if they were off on a picnic. The people there to see them off would often be in tears.

‘Don’t forget us will you?’ they would shout as they waved goodbye.

The passengers would respond with a happy smile.

‘I’ll never forget you. And don’t you ever forget me either!’

And then they would wave to each other until the train disappeared beyond the horizon. The railway line leading to The Land of Neverending Sunset was peculiar. The train would start off on the Jakarta line, but then at some point would diverge. The tracks turned into the crevice of a valley then vanished in a cloud of mist. Everyone seemed to understand that there was no point in trying to find out more unless you were prepared to

never return. And in fact nobody who had gone to The Land of Neverending Sunset had ever returned. Except perhaps in the dreams of those they'd left behind.

So every day at sunset I would observe the platform where the passengers for The Land of Neverending Sunset were waiting for their train. They arrived calmly, went up to the ticket booth, signed the paper then sat placidly on the bench. The golden setting sun transformed the platform floor into a pattern of tiles made from gold ingots. The people sitting on the bench – old men, mothers and their children, elderly women, a lad with a punk hairstyle – appeared so serene, so resigned to their fate, it was as if they were on a plane of bliss that transcended worldliness. What would make a person want to go and never return?

I wanted to ask one of them, but the platform was only for people going to The Land of Neverending Sunset. All I could do, along with everyone else at Tugu Station, was watch them as the blinding golden rays of the sun transformed them into silhouettes. In the blurriness of twilight they seemed to oscillate between being there and not being there. They clutched their suitcases and their backpacks and made calls on their mobile phones. Were they wishing farewell to their loved ones? Can't one make phone calls from The Land of Neverending Sunset?

Is The Land of Neverending Sunset a pretty place? There was not a single rumour or piece of hearsay about the place. There was nothing upon which we could base our speculations about the place, speculations which of course could well be entirely wrong. There was nothing to use as a starting point for our imaginings. Just the name, The Land of Neverending Sunset. What on earth could I make of a name like that?

I watched a woman who was about to set off for The Land of Neverending Sunset. She moved like a graceful nymph. I watched her long wavy hair; in the golden light it emanated an inexplicable yet infinite sense of contentment. Whereas contentment is usually transitory, fleeting, sometimes leaving us with a sense that it's a pointless emotion. Does The Land of Neverending Sunset promise eternal happiness? More of the people coming to Tugu Station choose Jakarta rather than The Land of Neverending Sunset as their destination. And many of them are also going to Jakarta to seek happiness, to pursue their dreams, to realise a luring ambition – even though many feel that Jakarta is like hell.

I stood transfixed at Tugu Station, gazing at the sunset. The gleaming train to The Land of Neverending Sunset pulled in. If I got on board I would never return.

