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## *Menggarami burung terbang* Local understandings of national history

Due to outbreaks of left-wing insurgencies in Malaya, Indonesia, Burma and the Philippines in that year, 1948 has come to be regarded by some scholars as a 'watershed' in Southeast Asian history.<sup>1</sup> In Indonesia, on 18 September 1948 in Madiun, East Java, former Communist leader Muso, who had recently returned from a long exile spent mostly in the Soviet Union, and who had begun advocating that Indonesia align itself with the Soviet Union, took charge of a revolt in which low-ranking Communist leaders took over the local government and set up a revolutionary government. This became known as the Madiun Affair. The uprising was quickly put down by the government's Siliwangi division, its leaders were captured or killed, and many Communists were massacred. Muso himself was killed in a skirmish on 31 October.

The abortive 1965 coup in Indonesia represents another 'watershed' in Southeast Asian history, 'a major reverse for communism in the Cold War' (Easter 2005:55). The coup attempt, which resulted in the death of six army generals, was officially blamed on the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI, Indonesian Communist Party) leading to a widespread campaign of violence against suspected Communists. In John Roosa's words (2006:16), 'Sukarno's neutrality in the cold war and the PKI's growing power within the country were ended in one fell swoop'.

This article focuses on the ways in which those watershed events are illuminated in a work of fiction, and how a Javanese worldview gives rise to particular, localized understandings of the events. The work of fiction is Sitok Srengenge's first novel, *Menggarami burung terbang* (Seasoning the flying bird),<sup>2</sup> the action of which is bracketed by the years 1948 and 1965. The

<sup>1</sup> Reassessing the Origins of the Cold War in Southeast Asia: A Roundtable on the Sixtieth Anniversary of 1948, National University of Singapore, 10-11 July 2008.

<sup>2</sup> The title refers to a futile action – putting seasoning on a bird while it is still flying rather than when it is on the dinner table.

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protagonists of the novel are unassuming village folk who are bewildered at the political events and mass brutality that overtake them, and whose understanding of the world is filtered through natural omens. Such a worldview is described by Quinn (1992:124) as a 'teleological' view of phenomena, in other words a belief that everything that exists and happens – including natural omens – does so for a final purpose, that there is a reason for everything.

While sharing some elements with Ahmad Tohari's 1985 trilogy *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (A dancing girl of Paruk Village), such as the manipulation of village cultural performances by the PKI, the style of Sitok's novel is markedly different from that of Tohari's work in its rich, dense blend of realist prose in Indonesian, Javanese mythology and Javanese language. Another distinguishing feature of Sitok's novel is its magic realist quality.

### *Warna lokal*

In my discussion of the novel I argue that its 'teleological view of phenomena' can be understood as a manifestation of *warna lokal* or 'local colour', a phenomenon that periodically comes to the fore in Indonesian fiction. Indeed, the drive to rediscover and represent the 'real', local Indonesia is not a new phenomenon.

The search for the local had been a key force for the four colonial authors whose stories were later anthologized by Pramoedya Ananta Toer in *Tempo doeloe*. Stories in that anthology such as Francis's *Tjerita Nyai Dasima* (The story of Nyai Dasima) and Kommer's *Tjerita Nji Paina* (The story of Nyi Paina) are depictions of domestic life that focus on relationships – forced marriages, faithful and faithless *nyai* (mistresses), as Watson (1971:423) observes – between the Dutch and their colonized subjects.

In early independent Indonesia, in Amsterdam in 1953, Asrul Sani focused on the local at a conference organized by the Stichting voor Culturele Samenwerking (Sticusa, Foundation for Cultural Cooperation). Bemoaning the fact that the Indonesian hinterland – where 'pessimism was unknown' – was being forgotten, and that the connection with the village had been broken, Asrul called for writers to go to the village in order to 'know themselves' (Mohamad 2002:205). (As Goenawan Mohamad observes, Asrul's call for writers to 'go home' feels somewhat unconvincing, given his urban proclivities.)

Two decades after the Amsterdam conference, Ajip Rosidi wrote poetry which, with its focus on the Sundanese worldview, myths and legends, represents another significant manifestation of *warna lokal*. This is exemplified in the final two lines of his 1973 sonnet 'Terkenang topeng Cirebon' (Remembering Cirebon masks):

The further I go and the more I see  
 The more highly I value our own heritage, so neglected and uncared for<sup>3</sup>

Henk Maier (1994) and Will Derks (2002) have written about *sastra lokal* (local literature), particularly in Riau, before the fall of Soeharto, and a resurgence of wayang (shadow play) literature in Java in the mid-1980s has also been well documented. Gunoto Saparie (2007) reminds us of the strengthening of *warna lokal* literature in the 1980s, spearheaded by two seminal novels: Ahmad Tohari's trilogy and Linus Suryadi's *Pengakuan Pariyem* (The confessions of Pariyem, 1981). While the *lokal* in those two works was Java, writers from other areas of Indonesia too, such as Korrie Layun Rampan (Kalimantan) and AA Navis and Darman Moenir (West Sumatra), incorporated local traditions into their writing in the mid-New Order period. Writing in 2006, Dad Murniah suggests that the inclusion of local colour into literature in the 1980s was part of an attempt to develop a genuinely Indonesian literary theory and criticism. This takes us back, once again, to Asrul Sani's call for an Indonesian focus to literature, as mentioned earlier.

In the 1990s the Gerakan Revitalisasi Sastra Pedalaman (Movement for Revitalization of Literature from the Hinterland), with its focus on community networks as well as its assertion of the significance of the 'hinterland' in thinking about Indonesian literature, signified a different way of understanding the local vis-à-vis the national. Michael Bodden (2001) points out that much of the *warna lokal* fiction in the New Order was essentially a critique of the backwardness of regional customs vis-à-vis the modernity represented by the nation-state.

Calls for localized expressions and understandings of literature have continued and, arguably, been strengthened with the impact of globalization. The fall of Soeharto in 1998 cleared a space for writers and artists to look back on and gradually start to explore the painful events surrounding, in particular, the 1965 attempted coup and its violent and bloody aftermath, a period that had been effectively erased from Indonesian history for 32 years.

Post-Soeharto, *warna lokal* can further be understood as a manifestation of an intensifying regionalism, which can be read as an expression of resistance to the 'official nationalism' that developed during the Soeharto years, resistance that has been strengthened by the process of decentralization. It is useful to draw comparisons between *warna lokal* and expressions of Indonesian nationalism. Both discourses can be understood as expressions of resistance to perceived 'foreign' forces, such as globalization. Furthermore, both resonate with Asrul Sani's observation in 1955 that Indonesia was a nation 'looking for its foundation' (Mohamad 2002:208).

<sup>3</sup> Translation by Teeuw 1979:216.

What, then, is the function of *warna lokal* in literature in post-Soeharto Indonesia? A number of commentators have pointed out that globalization has not delivered to Indonesia the benefits of highly evolved civilization, but rather has destroyed traditional values, leading in turn to the destruction of the spiritual values that define Eastern nations. It is seen as imperative to restore those values in the face of the seemingly unstoppable forces of globalization. This is where *warna lokal* comes in. The annual literary convention Temu Sastra Mitra Praja Utama (MPU, Provincial Literary Convention), for example, at its gathering in Banten in 2004, explicitly recommended that writers revive a focus on local myth and history.

Murniah (2006) has proposed a set of criteria for *warna lokal* literature. It has a clearly identifiable geographical setting. It evokes local atmosphere and characteristics such as customs and traditions, rituals, myth, local history, and the introduction of lexical items from the regional language. Commonly cited examples of contemporary writers who breathe local colour into their work are the Minangkabau writers Raudal Tanjung Benua (particularly his 2005 short story collection *Parang tak berulu* (A knife without a hilt), depicting women in Minangkabau society) and Gus Tf Sakai (particularly his 2000 Minangkabau-based novel *Tambo* (Chronicle)), Zen Hae's 2004 Betawi-based anthology *Rumah kawin* (House of marriage), Taufik Ikram Jamil who focuses on Riau culture, and Tan Lioe Ie, who brings local Chinese customs to life in his poetry.

Participants in the 2005 Kongres Cerpen (Short Story Congress) in Pekanbaru seemed pessimistic about the role of *warna lokal* in post-Soeharto Indonesia. There was a prevailing opinion, as expressed by Adi Wicaksono, that *warna lokal* was used largely as a decorative backdrop to a story, without any real effort to connect that backdrop and the worldview of the local people. The view was also put forward that Indonesian literature was hampered by what the commentators termed *rabun dekat*, 'short sightedness', resulting from writers being seduced by globalization yet being unable to link the global with the local (*Warna lokal* 2005). Ajip Rosidi suggested that the 'locality' for contemporary writers is just colour, ignoring the fact that locality also brings with it a certain way of thinking and understanding the world (Murniah 2006).

In my discussion of *Menggarami burung terbang*, I suggest that *warna lokal* in this novel is more than a mere backdrop; rather it gives real insight into local ways of thinking and interpreting the world. I demonstrate that *warna lokal* in the novel gives the reader an insight into how a Javanese worldview produces particular localized understandings of the earlier-mentioned watershed events of twentieth-century Indonesia, including a carefully crafted exposition of how Javanese villagers are politicized. As such, the novel can be read as a complementary volume to non-fictional and personal accounts

of Javanese village life, such as those provided by writers such as Robert Jay, Niels Mulder, Koentjaraningrat and Supomo Surjohudojo.<sup>4</sup>

*Menggarami burung terbang: Warna lokal as a new paradigm*

My discussion of *warna lokal* in *Menggarami burung terbang* draws on George Quinn's meticulous explication (1992) of the novel in Javanese. I argue that Sitok Srengenge's novel may be termed an example of a Javanese novel in Indonesian.<sup>5</sup>

What differentiates this novel from Indonesian novels written in Indonesian is its focus on and privileging of Javanese cultural identity and values, and the absence in it of both overtly nationalistic discourse and narratives of modernity. This is a novel that attempts to express in Indonesian what Quinn (1992:75) calls the 'Javanese essence' (*rasa kajawan, raos Jawi, or kajawen*), something that would have been unthinkable to writers like Poedjowardojo, who wrote in 1956 that 'there are no foreign words that can accurately and aptly convey the vital pulse of Javanese raos, only the Javanese language can do this' (Quinn 1992:75). Above all this is a narrative that stresses communal values and regional character, embodied in particular in the lives of the *wong cilik* (literally 'little people').

In common with the novels discussed by Quinn (1992:59, 134, 185), I argue that *Menggarami burung terbang* is 'essentially a novel of domestic life' related through discourse that demonstrates a teleological view of phenomena and that alludes frequently to other works – *wayang, tembang macapat*, folk literature – from the Javanese canon. In a literary allusion that also grounds the narrative firmly in the Javanese context, the protagonist of this novel is Ronggo Waskito, a playful reference to the most famous Javanese poet, Ronggowarsito. Ronggowarsito (1802-1873) was a poet at the palace of the Susuhunan of Surakarta and, as Headley (2004:380) points out, is considered to be 'capable of reconciling Islam and Javanese religion'. Ronggowarsito's greatest achievement was to write the history of Java in poetry and prose.<sup>6</sup> In Javanese, *waskito* or *waskita* means clairvoyant, an attribute the character in the novel indeed possesses.

Quinn (1992:185) argues that at the core of the Javanese novel is 'man and woman in the most elemental of societies, marriage'. Marriage and all its complications are central to the storylines of *Menggarami burung terbang*. In

<sup>4</sup> Jay 1969; Mulder 1978; Koentjaraningrat 1985; Surjohudojo 1974, 1980.

<sup>5</sup> Other titles that I would include in this category are Umar Kayam's *Para priyayi* (The aristocrats), Ahmad Tohari's *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* trilogy and Linus Suryadi's *Pengakuan Pariyem*.

<sup>6</sup> For more on Ronggowarsito, see Headley 2004:380-4; Quinn 1992:267-71.

the novels discussed by Quinn (1992:99), the domestic struggle is often due to, or exacerbated by, troubles within the nuclear family or 'problematic parenthood,' which is often manifested in the absence of one or both parents, or the presence of a step-parent. The problematic parenthood in Ronggo Waskito's case lies with his stepson Daru Jati who, due to constant illness as a child, had his name changed to Agung Suryandaru, in accordance with Javanese tradition. The troubled nuclear family is established quite early in the novel when we learn that Ronggo Waskito married his first wife Sanestri 'when news came that Japanese soldiers were landing in the harbour of Semarang' (1942) and divorced her 'about a year after the civil war in Madiun' (1948) (Srengenge 2004:58). He went on to marry Paridewi, who had separated from her husband 'a few weeks before Bung Kasno [Soekarno] announced that there were no longer separate states in this archipelago because all had been brought together in a united nation' (1945) (Srengenge 2004:59). For Ronggo Waskito, then, as for the other villagers, personal history parallels and is no less significant than national history. These *wong cilik* understand the world through the prism of their own lives. For them, events such as the Madiun incident and the Japanese occupation have little to do with a coherent narrative of Indonesian national history; they are, rather, isolated incidents that help shape and give context to personal histories, and intrude into – rather than impact significantly upon – village history.

In the Javanese novel there are many references to other works in the Javanese literary canon, such as folk literature, myths and popular history, and to well-known romantic or moralistic verses, sung in the form of *tembang macapat*. The storyline in *Menggarami burung terbang* is repeatedly interspersed with *tembang* (sung or recited Javanese, Madurese or Sundanese poetry) or *macapat* (reading of Javanese literary works in verse form, without musical accompaniment) that either illustrates the narrative or re-tells it, in a way more accessible to illiterate villagers. Almost 60 pages (Srengenge 2004:108-67), for example, are devoted to a re-telling of the romance of King Anglingdharma, a series of romantic tales that encapsulate the 'Javanese essence' and which, the narrator reminds Paridewi, 'are important in order to explain how people at that time viewed and gave meaning to their universe. Such legends have quite a profound influence on you.' (Srengenge 2004:169.)

As Quinn (1992:70) reminds us, 'The explicit musicality of songs and *macapat* verse is important, for in the middle of the silence of the reading act, it refers the reader to a world of romantic, uniquely Javanese narrative sound.' As such, *Menggarami burung terbang* makes significant demands on the reader. It is impossible to grasp its full import without a knowledge of the Javanese language and of the mythology that underpins so much of the narrative.

For the inhabitants of Sunyaruri village in *Menggarami burung terbang* everything in the universe is linked; randomness is unthinkable. Mulder

(1978:17) points out that in the Javanese worldview 'signs and manifestations that come one's way through chance are understood to be coincidences that reveal the cosmic coordinates of current conditions and events to come'. This teleological view means that all events have causes and all events are significant. The Sunyaruri villagers are alerted to change and danger by the physical omen of the shooting star, a metaphor that presides over the whole novel.

Unlike the *priyayi* (elite, official class) novels that are a sub-set of Quinn's Javanese novel, this is a novel about *wong cilik*, whose lives are contained within the borders of family and village, overshadowed by the dark, confining humidity of the teak forests of East Java, which simultaneously nurture and constrain them. The big conflicts in their lives are not those in Madiun or Jakarta, but, as in the Javanese legends that continue to inform their daily lives, those that derive from family feuds or inter-village rivalry for control of the teak forests. As Robert Cribb (1990:199) points out, forest policy had been an important source of tension in Javanese villages from Dutch times. The power of presidential candidates and PKI leaders means little to the *wong cilik*; the villager with the most power is the one who guards the forests from poachers. Paridewi's first husband, forest supervisor Ron Mandiro, proudly lists the creatures under his care: 'Every plant and animal, including the lichen and the ants, the poisonous mushrooms and the fungus clinging to the leaves and the bark.'<sup>7</sup>

For the *wong cilik* in Sunyaruri, presidential pronouncements and other historical moments are important only in so far as they impact on local life; the national ramifications of these events are largely meaningless. Far from being a watershed historical event, for Ronggo Waskito the Madiun affair was a date etched into his memory to help him remember the date of his divorce from Sanestri. How did independence and Soekarno's famous *Merdeka* speech change the lives of the Sunyaruri villagers?

Nothing changed. Our lives as peasants didn't change. Nothing in the village changed. The village roads still transformed into rivers of mud in the rainy season. The rivers ran dry, the fields dried up and the earth cracked during the dry season. The men still toiled in the fields from dawn to dusk. The women watched over and kept house, brought up the children and cooked, from dawn to dusk. From one harvest to the next the fruit of our labours only yielded enough to eat and buy simple clothing. We couldn't afford to buy new things. We made our own kitchen utensils and tools. Many miserable houses in the village were patched with bamboo and sago palm. Many of our children did not have the opportunity to get an education. Nothing changed.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Srengenge 2004:110. Segenap tetumbuhan dan binatang, tak terkecuali lumut atau semut, jamur beracun atau benalu yang nempel di daun dan kulit kayu.

<sup>8</sup> Srengenge 2004:59-60. Tak ada yang berubah. Nasib kami sebagai petani tak berubah. Seluruh desa ini tak berubah. Jalan-jalan kampung masih menjelma kali-kali lumpur di musim peng-

For others, achieving independence was perceived rather as a step backward, rendering the nation 'like a baby, still incapable of organizing the things that were once organized by the colonizers' (Srengenge 2004:164). Like the Madiun affair, the date of Indonesian independence was useful to Ronggo Waskito because it helped him remember another personal milestone: the date of his marriage to Paridewi.

Paridewi's in-laws explained the start of the Indonesian Revolution in the simplest of terms: 'the colonizers who had left have now returned and want to resume colonizing' (Srengenge 2004:179). For Paridewi the start of the Revolution meant little more than having to give her blessing to her husband Ron Mandiro who enlisted in the People's Army. Ron Mandiro himself is unable to interpret the war as 'the manifestation of the resistance of a colony that is no longer willing to be trampled on by a foreign power';<sup>9</sup> his response comes from a multi-layered Javanese spirituality, as he likens it to the *kawah Candradimuka*, a reference to the cow-shaped cauldron in Buddhist teachings, into the boiling waters of which a young man would be thrown to acquire supernatural powers, to the wayang story in which Gatotkaca achieved near-invulnerability when his parents threw him into the cauldron, and to a volcanic crater on the Dieng Plateau in Central Java.<sup>10</sup> Ron Mandiro decides to use the war as a journey back to his Javanese roots.

Kenneth Orr (1990:189) has described the 1950s conditions of isolation and poverty in a fairly typical village in Central Java, which perpetuated not only a lack of a school in the village, but also a lack of interest in formal education. Supomo Surjohudojo (1974:6) wrote from personal experience that 'it was a difficult and thankless job for the village officials in those days to bring the common village children to the classrooms, particularly during the planting and harvesting seasons', a situation echoed in the fictional village of Sunyaruri in the novel:

School, for them, was simply a waste of time, energy, and money. What would you do when you finished?... The thing that can change your destiny is work, not school.<sup>11</sup>

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hujan. Kali-kali kering, sawah-sawah kerontang, tanah pecah-pecah bila kemarau datang. Para lelaki masih mengucurkan peluh di padang-padang, dari subuh hingga petang. Para perempuan menjaga dan merawat rumah, mengasuh anak dan memasak, dari subuh sampai petang. Dari panen ke panen hasil kerja kami hanya cukup untuk makan dan sekedar membeli pembalut badan. Tak ada barang-barang yang mampu kami beli. Perkakas rumah tangga dan alat-alat kerja kami ciptakan sendiri. Rumah-rumah di desa ini banyak yang nestapa, tambal sulam antara bambu dan rumbia. Banyak di antara anak-anak kami tak berkesempatan mengenyam pendidikan. Tak ada yang berubah. (All translations are by the author.)

<sup>9</sup> Srengenge 2004:182. Wujud dari perlawanan anak bangsa yang tidak sudi diinjak tengukunya oleh bangsa manca.

<sup>10</sup> Candradimuka was also the name of a short-lived military academy in Bandung.

<sup>11</sup> Srengenge 2004:407. Sekolah, bagi mereka, hanya buang-buang waktu, tenaga, dan beaya. Setelah lulus mau apa?...Yang mengubah nasib bukan sekolah, melainkan kerja.

Into this world, a world interpreted through Javanese mythology and marked by personal – rather than national – milestones, a number of key characters are introduced in the novel. These characters act as catalysts to the gradual politicization of the villagers in the period leading up to 30 September 1965.

As James Scott (1985:xv) points out, political activity throughout most of history has been the preserve of the middle class and the intelligentsia. Peasant politics has been led largely by outsiders. Donald Hindley (1964:9-11) wrote of the situation in Indonesia where ‘individual villagers have been slow to take spontaneous initiative in village or wider politics’, adding that their membership of organizations was largely passive and dependent on ‘literate urban leadership’. Cribb (1990:9) reminds us that teachers were extensively recruited by the PKI and were regarded as ‘the key to influencing future generations’. Such non-peasant leadership and influence is present in the novel in the character of Ronggo Waskito’s primary school teacher Guru Dario, who exhorts the villagers to look up and out, through his Soekarno-inspired exhortations to be self-reliant, to refuse to continue to be controlled by foreign interests.<sup>12</sup> To fail to heed his advice, Dario warns, will bring about a time of curse, *zaman kutukan*.<sup>13</sup>

Through listening to the Socratic-style dialogues between Dario and Ronggo Waskito, the villagers are offered an alternative view of historical cause-and-effect, one in which the shooting star and the comet may in fact be purely natural phenomena unrelated to historical circumstances. Dario reminds the villagers, through his talks over coffee and cigarettes in the local *warung*, of the importance of Soekarno’s commitment to revolution. For Ronggo and the other villagers it is not an easy thing to ‘imagine a tremendous change occurring in a short space of time’ (Srengenge 2004:209). Ronggo, who by his own admission knows nothing about organizations, ‘especially political organizations’ (in his words ‘*apalagi organisasi politik*’, Srengenge 2004:210), unwittingly becomes caught up in Dario’s political world when he agrees to the latter’s request to use his house to conduct ‘meetings,’ in his naivety unaware that they are Communist Party meetings. Dario uses Ronggo’s leadership status in the village as a way to enlist more Party members. He rightly assumes that the villagers would interpret the use of Ronggo’s house, and his willingness to supply snacks, as tacit approval of the Party’s activities: ‘The people will see that Ronggo supports it and after that the whole village will join’ (Srengenge 2004:211). Furthermore, Dario organizes an Independence Day parade that will involve an array of musical performers – a drum band, an accordion player, tambourines, a *barong* dance – and his own pupils bearing both the Indonesian flag and the flag of the PKI,

<sup>12</sup> Of relevance here is Soekarno’s shifting tactics vis-à-vis foreign powers, tactics that were intended to achieve Indonesia’s emancipation from colonialism and independence as a world power.

<sup>13</sup> Srengenge 2004:51. *Zaman kutukan*, or Kalabendu, was first described by Ronggowarsito.

all of which will convey the clear message that 'the communist organization is the biggest and the strongest' (Srengenge 2004:211). As Hindley (1964:123) points out, part of the PKI recruitment strategy since the early 1950s had been to pay 'warm respect to the symbols of Indonesian nationalism: the national anthem, the national flag, the national language, nationalist anniversaries'.

Dario also works through local traditions and beliefs to convey his message, pointing out that when the villagers visit the local wise man Ki Surounggul, he gives them not only advice but three objects, which he asks them to interpret. The objects are a whip (*pecut*), a pair of men's underpants (*kolor*), and a black headband (*ikat kepala hitam*). While other villagers interpret the objects as symbolizing guides for daily living, Dario points out the 'real' meaning: if we take the first letters of each of the words we end up with PKI. 'Choose *pecut*, *kolor*, *ikat*, PKI, Indonesian Communist Party', he tells his listeners (Srengenge 2004:314). Ronggo can only reflect on how such interpretations can lead to differences of opinion, 'among neighbours, within families even' (Srengenge 2004:318).

Dario is not only a fervent admirer of Soekarno; he is also an 'extension of the tongue' (*perpanjangan lidah*) of PKI Chairman Dipa Nusantara Aidit,<sup>14</sup> thinly disguised in the novel as Bung Dipo. One of Aidit's great achievements was to attract and mobilize peasants into the PKI, working through cadres like Guru Dario, with the result that 'by September 1959 the PKI organization had been extended into the great majority of Javanese villages and into virtually every village in the strongly PKI area of Central and East Java' (Hindley 1964:164). Yet despite Aidit's prominence in Indonesian national politics, when asked who he is, Ronggo Waskito explains to Paridewi, 'Oh, he's a big shot from the capital, originally from Sumatra they say. None of us here in the village know him. And he doesn't know us either. The closest we can get is hearing Guru Dario mention his name all the time.' (Srengenge 2004:83.) The gap between national politics and local understandings of the world remains deep and wide.

That local understanding is frequently projected in the novel though a dream, which transforms into reality. Such is the case with the events of 30 September 1965. The narrator Babare Bagaskoro Nanating has a dream in which people 'no longer care about death', where they feel the need to 'root out and slaughter' (Srengenge 2004:436). When he runs out into the street on a morning bathed in hues of orange, he discovers that everyone he meets has had the same dream. The world they find themselves in is one where 'people enjoy quarrelling in the name of peace. Stab each other as they fight for calm. Have no qualms taking the lives of their fellow beings.' (Srengenge 2004:437.) The only way for the villagers to express their fear and sadness is through a *suluk*, a mood song sung by a wayang puppeteer at times of intense sadness:

<sup>14</sup> Srengenge 2004: 83. For a discussion of Aidit's role as PKI leader, see Roosa 2006:139-75.

desolate, desolate, the sun washed in sadness  
 as if sensing the stench of death, oh  
 beauty is extinguished,  
 the tongue flickers  
 faded crushed, everywhere blood thickens, oh!

And their bodies  
 distressed at seeing the blood  
 sky tinged with red, oh!<sup>15</sup> (Srengenge 2004:438-9.)

The description that follows, of a small child sitting on the road beside his parents, unaware that they are dead, is as haunting as any television coverage of the victims of modern war and as powerful a commentary on the devastation of those days as any history book could provide.

The imagery of the people's dream clearly situates the events within a Javanese worldview. The national leader, who is *digdaya* (unconquerable, invulnerable), and who has ruled the nation for two *windu* (a period of eight years on the Javanese calendar), believes that he is *waskita* (possessed of the power to predict the future) and can read the signs of the natural world. After he has handed over responsibility for securing the nation to a general 'who is more fluent speaking with weapons than with words' (Srengenge 2004:442) (a satirical reference to Soeharto's rather strange oratory style), the latter immediately forbids the carrying of 'weapons' by the people. What this means in practice for the villagers is that they are not able to carry their hoes, sickles, cleavers, carpenters' planes, hammers, axes, saws, harvesting blades, machetes, fishing rods, knives and razor blades. The impact of this novel resides in powerful passages such as these, which situate the events of 1965 at the level of those whose lives were most affected yet who at the same time had little understanding of the political machinations at work beyond their own village.

The impact of the *prahara* (upheaval) in Jakarta on Sunyaruri village is immediate. The instinctive response of the villagers is to fortify the village (*membentengi desa*) (Srengenge 2004:457). This has been their response, since

<sup>15</sup> Suram, suramalah surya kesedihan,  
 seakan mencium ayit mayat, o  
 keindahannya telah musnah,  
 lidah menjulur,  
 lusuh kumal darahnya rata mengental, o!

Adapun tubuhnya  
 sedih melihat darah  
 langit semburat merah, o!

colonial times, to all forms of external threat.<sup>16</sup> By the same token, however, when Guru Dario is arrested, the villagers immediately renounce all knowledge of the man – despite the lack of any real understanding of why he has been arrested. His name is now ‘a pile of shit that must be avoided’ (Srengenge 2004:459). What unites the villagers now is their common enemy: anyone who has ever been involved in Guru Dario’s activities. Inevitably, this includes Ronggo Waskito, formerly the most respected member of the village who now becomes a target because of his willingness to lend his house to and provide refreshments for Guru Dario’s Party meetings. Betrayed by his own son-in-law, Ronggo is taken away in a jeep after a banner appears on his house bearing the words ‘Barisan Tani Indonesia’ (Indonesian Peasants Front) a peasant organization affiliated with the PKI. We see here a continuation of a trope that is common in the work of other writers such as Ahmad Tohari – the thinly-disguised ‘dumb Javanese peasant’ depicted by an urban writer.

Notwithstanding the pitfalls he falls into as an urban writer giving voice to village people, the particular skill of Sitok Srengenge as a storyteller is his ability to contextualize momentous national events within the mundane, yet richly drawn, routines of the villagers. He does this by juxtaposing carefully crafted and poignant cameos of village life against the unexpected and shocking historical incidents of 1965. One evening towards dusk, for example, ambling homeward, Ronggo Waskito’s son Jiwanggo attempts to rescue his buffalo, whose legs have become entangled in a creeping vine, when he discovers the headless corpse of a villager Mugi Rewang floating in the river. When Jiwanggo rushes home to tell his father, the latter is performing his nightly chore of lighting the kerosene lamps at the front of the house. It transpires that when Mugi had disappeared in the company of a group of unknown men a few days earlier, his wife had thought nothing of it, assuming he had gone off to play dominoes. For his part, at the moment when Ronggo Waskito is taken off ‘for questioning’, his attention is taken more by the piquant aroma of the chicken in soy sauce being prepared by his wife than by the intimidating demeanour of his uniformed captors. Furthermore, when he arrives at the old colonial building for interrogation, his first observation is that the military commander, Suroso, is a soldier Ronggo recognizes as a regular customer at Warung Tomboluwe near the animal market, where he would always order goat curry. After the interrogation is over, and Ronggo is released, Suroso’s throwaway line about hoping they will soon share another goat curry is followed in the next breath by the devastating information that Ronggo’s neighbor Rusmini is being detained on suspicion of being Gerwani.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> A strong sense of the tendency for a village to close ranks against other villages and the outside world in general is gleaned in Surjohudojo 1980.

<sup>17</sup> Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, the women’s organization closely aligned to, but not formally affiliated with, the PKI.

Quinn (1992:190) argues that a number of motifs serve to ‘naturalize’ the Javanese novel by ‘giving them historical depth and aesthetic impact derived from allusion to deeply entrenched convictions’. This is the key to the *warna lokal* of *Menggarami burung terbang*. Readers of this novel are immersed in Sitok Srengenge’s rich evocation of Javanese traditions, ranging from detailed depictions of *mitoni*, the ceremony marking the seventh month of a woman’s pregnancy, to the ingredients, processes and beliefs involved in the consumption of *jamu* or herbal medicine, to the lyrics of the *macapat*, to explanations of local myths, to allusions to a world where the boundary between dreams and reality is blurred, and where those dreams are shared. Here *warna lokal* is neither decorative nor superficial – rather, it seeks to situate major national events – the watersheds of Indonesian history – within the context of the worldview of the Javanese villagers who interpreted them in culturally specific ways. Above all, the effect on Sunyaruri village of the aftermath of the attempted 1965 coup is the loss of innocence, summed up in the novel simply as, ‘The kinship felt by the villagers had been defiled. Forever.’ (Srengenge 2004:505.)

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