

**Djenar Maesa Ayu. *They Say I'm a Monkey*. Trans. by Michael Nieto Garcia. Jakarta: Metafor Publishing, 2005. i-xx, 126 pages.**

Ramon Guillermo

Michael Nieto Garcia's English translation of the collection of eleven short stories by Djenar Maesa Ayu entitled *They Say I'm a Monkey* (*Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!*) provides a fresh glimpse into the exciting ferment that Indonesian literature has been experiencing since the downfall of the Suharto regime, in 1998. This English translation comes with a glossary at the end and some words about the author by the poet Sutardji Calzoum Bachri.

One of the short stories in this collection was judged to be the best among those published in 2002 by the daily *Kompas*, while the collection itself was nominated in the best-book category for the Khatulistiwa Literary Award. Djenar has subsequently published a new collection of short stories, *Jangan Main-Main (Dengan Kelaminmu; 2004)*, and a novel, *Nayla* (2005).

Djenar's work has predictably generated not only great public interest but also has been controversial among Indonesia's guardians of morality. Even English-language readers would be startled, if not by the language, then perhaps by the candor of these stories. Despite the frequent observation that the stories are unusually transgressive, given the unique and quite distinct cultural and religious situation prevailing in Indonesia, they seem to be no less relevant and topical in many other contexts. Djenar's stories may assume different inflections and meanings when translated into other languages and cultures, but the gravity of the violence inflicted upon women and the prevalence of the sexual abuse of children portrayed in them seem equally urgent and timely for most societies. These are stories of uncomfortable family secrets that are often consigned to the oblivion of forgetting or, at best, of half-memory. The stories that Djenar relates are important because nobody is supposed to make them public. These are stories that are often known and remembered only by the victims and the victimizers.

Djenar's stories, whether told like secrets in hushed whispers or blurted out in between convulsive sobs, are generally filled with a sense of violent despair and desperation. The verbal transgressiveness of her stories mirrors the raw and immediate experience of sexual violence, while the literary devices she employs function to create some distance, such as the use of the metaphor of the painting in "Painting a Window" or the strange multiplying snakes in "The Leech." It is as if they were being deliberately and carefully "fictionalized" in order that we may not so easily disbelieve in their status as "fiction." The fictiveness of each story must be preserved and continually asserted so that the readers can continue reading, comforted in the fact that "this is only fiction." On the other hand, an innovative literary device used in one story, "SMS," succeeds in almost obliterating fictiveness cleverly by employing the direct form of cell-phone text messages. But a prevailing, general sense of unreality and lack of concrete physicality impart a dreamlike, surreal character to most of the narratives.

The patronizing reference to Djenar's work and those of some of her colleagues as belonging to the derogatorily labeled genre of so-called "*sastra wangi*" (fragrant literature) completely misses the whole point of these brutally honest representations of a society that, far from being "fragrant," stinks of injustice and repression against women. Accusing her and other contemporary Indonesian women writers of using sex to sell literature, as some male critics have done, is just a cheap shot meant to obscure the critics' hypocritical, profit-driven motives. It is true that Djenar's works have sold phenomenally well in Indonesia, having had eight large print runs so far. But this fact can only be viewed positively as leading to a new openness in literature and literary language and as an unprecedented advance in the education of the public on themes in urgent need of discussion. It should also not be overlooked that writing and publishing this book at all required much courage and commitment on the part of the author.

Despite its positive aspects, the collection as a whole seems to be afflicted by a certain fundamental limitation of perspective. For instance, even the glimmers of fulfilled feminine sexuality in the stories such as "SMS," "Nayla's Time," and "Forsaken Dreams" do not seem to escape the objectifying masculine sexual violence that dominates them and which they mirror to a certain degree. Djenar's critique of social hypocrisy also seems to affirm nihilistically the emptiness of all morality rather than point to the possibility of a more-liberating ethics of sexuality and love. The ambivalent story of the "Dog Man" is a case in point. Furthermore, the frequently middle- and upper-class female persona in the stories tends to displace the force of the critique toward a rather narrow notion of individual sexual liberation. This comes at the price of gaining a broader view more relevant to the experiences of a greater number of women in Indonesian society.

The beautiful story "Asmoro" stands out, because even when the lovers fail to meet in the end, it tragically gestures toward the possibility of a liberating ethical relationship between the sexes and genders. The story is somewhat of a parable, likening literary creation with an encounter between lovers. Even though the glimpse of a resolution that it allows is ultimately an aesthetic and spiritual one, this example shows that going beyond desperation and nihilism does not have to end up in easy moralizing solutions. As the narrator puts it, "A peculiar struggle possesses the two of them. The bursting desire to meet and the desire to be together a little longer are just one side of the coin. However hard they try to prolong being together, they'll try just as hard to quickly end it." In the epic struggle of the female heroine, Adjani, to be united with Asmoro, we find a contrast with some of the characters in this collection who despairingly use their very objectification as sexual objects as ambivalent and self-defeating weapons against men and patriarchy. Here, finally, is a true and sovereign female subject who, refusing to be victimized, strains with her whole being toward the fulfillment of love.