

Eka Kurniawan. *Beauty Is a Wound: A Novel*. Trans. Annie Tucker. New York: New Directions Books, 2015. 470 pp. [Eka Kurniawan, *Cantik Itu Luka: Sebuah Novel*. Yogyakarta: AKY Press, 2002.]

Rudolf Mrázek

— In praise of *Beauty Is a Wound*; for Ben, too late —

To historians as to fiction writers it is an old and disturbing question: how much imagination is needed to write the past; what does it take to be there? Eka Kurniawan was born in 1975, so he was thirteen when Suharto departed and twenty when *Reformasi* went stale and failed. Eka could listen to people who remembered the National Revolution of 1945, and also to survivors and perpetrators of the murders of 1965 and 1966. His listening formed limitations and possibilities that determined his own choices. Beneath the listening, of course, there was the assigned reading of the Suharto-era textbooks, mainly lies, but authoritative.

*Beauty Is a Wound* was conceived when all the stories seemed to come to their end, at the moment when perceived freedom of speech caused a surge that formed a huge and thick heap of noise. Eka's novel is a courageous and close-to-impossible effort to hear through the heap. Likewise, when we read the book, we get lost in the heap and are rewarded by an echo of our hearing.<sup>1</sup>

A reader of a particular age may find much of the novel predictable: predictable *molek*, beautiful, *mooi*, mixed-blood, Dutch-native, *Indos*, preferably women and their equally predictable turn to prostitution or something very much like it. The predictable lust of *Indiese letteren*, of half-naked and bronze bodies; warm and dark places, preferably at the edge of the jungle. The predictable curse of the West-and-East-not-really-meeting, the curse that lingers, even when the "Whites" are physically missing; gadgets of the *Indo* curse (call it modernity): gramophone, 78-rpm vinyls, with Schubert's *Unfinished* and Beethoven's *Ninth*, predictably. It is all there in Eka's novel, along with the yellowing photographs on the wall of a house long deserted, and some gold and gems hidden in the garden, or so whispers go.

There is, equally predictably, "native tradition," *Indo*, too, in fact: princesses, meditation, and *wayang*, inevitably, Destarata and Kuruserta; at one moment, a young woman runs to the top of a mountain, spreads her wings, and flies. The mountain still carries her name.

Eka, however, takes on the predictable—in the manner of Pramoedya of precious memory, but brutally more so, with a blunt knife. There are some tears, but rather more blood, semen, and some much less mentionable stuff on every page, at every cut. The Dutch, blue-eyed Indies lover (and love he does) trains *ajaks*, the wild dogs (Eka says), to pit a native against them in a fight to the death. For the first time in my

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<sup>1</sup> Despite what some other reviewers have said about this English translation, I found Annie Tucker's translation worthy of high praise.

long and eventful career as a historian of modern Indonesia, I had a nightmare about a Dutchman!

There is a predictable attempt by the principal *Indo* heroine of the novel—who survived the Japanese War and the National Revolution while her relatives vanished—to recover the treasure left in the Dutch house of her childhood. This particular search for the past is one of the most exquisitely written passages of the book. The treasure, gold and gems and whatnot, is supposed to be hidden, of course, in a shithole. The search takes a very long time and nothing is found. As the woman says, calmly, and this is the moment when we begin to love her, “God stole it.”

Even with the treasure lost, however, the *Indo* line and *Indo* curse are not cut—not completely cut, that is. The *Indo* heroine is forced, predictably, into a Japanese brothel during the war, and she stays in an Indonesian brothel after the war and through the revolution. Three daughters are born to her, like chapters in a book on Japanese War, National Revolution, Independent Indonesia. They all come out of rapes. These girls’ eyes are dreamy, as they should be; still *Indo*, still mixed-blood, “half-Japanese, half-Dutch, and a little-bit-Indonesian,” still perfect for one becoming a prostitute again, or something like it.

Eka is deadly, flat serious in handling his knife (pen, computer). He lets his heroine come upon the writings of Multatuli in the Japanese brothel, the holiest of the holies (Multatuli, that is) in the *Indiese letteren* canon, the most sentimental, and the most liberal. She reads the book between her “appointments” with “clients,” and when she gives birth she calls her baby daughter Adinda after the sweetest of Multatuli’s women. Eka makes her read Multatuli again, in a post-1945 Indonesian brothel this time, between clients again. She smokes “cigarettes without clove” on this occasion; she reads Multatuli, “but prefers travel novels.”

There is the most lively population of ghosts in *Beauty Is a Wound*, often, if not mostly, Marquezian ghosts, but who cares? First, we live in a global world, and ghosts travel at least as easily as we do; second, as soon as Eka’s (and Marquez’s) ghosts appear, world comes to life; or better (as Blanchot may say), when everything disappears, the ghosts make their *apparition*. The ghosts are frequent flyers between our world and the beyond. When a *kiyai*, a little dumb, asks one of them, a ghost of a dead person (and they are all ghosts of dead persons, of course), “what does it mean like to be dead?” the ghost answers: “Actually, it’s pretty fun. That’s the main reason, why, out of everyone who dies, not one person chooses to come back to life again.” And what if some do? Well, “that’s how the dead people are.”

Eka’s novel is fun-loving (like the dead people are), passionate, wild, and often disgusting, and so it seems not to give in to the *Indo* curse, the *mooi Indie*, the “tradition,” the *rust en orde*, the *perintah halus*, and to the Indonesia for so long cursed. Eka is ready to disgust his reader, to the limit of the bearable and often beyond. Sex in the book, not love but sex, certainly is not gentle. There is much of it, as much as there is of ghosts, beyond the limit, purely carnal, rapish, by people to people and by dogs to people, “too much, stop it,” one thinks, and Eka clearly wants one to. The mass-ness of the copulation spooks away the cuteness, and, *almost*, the possibility of love.

As the novel *progresses*, men and women sink into filth. There is much smell, sometimes pleasant and mostly not, true, a little wisp of Lampong coffee, of cigarettes, with clove and without; no *melati* (jasmine), albeit one of the whore's daughters, the one born before Adinda, is called Alamanda. At one moment a man is seen carrying a flower, but he throws it to a dog. There is most prominently an odor of lizard shit, the worst of all shit odors, Eka says, and the smell marks the most significant sex love scene, a rare if not the only one *love* scene in the book. (The last daughter in the saga is said to be ugly like a turd. Her name is Beauty.) It leaves you disgusted, but also it wakes you up to how odorless the other books on your Indonesian-history shelf are; and it elevates you to sniffing.

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*Beauty Is a Wound* is a saga in which the modern history of Indonesia schleps from the late 1930s to the present. What historians call milestones climb one over the other and morph one into the other: 1938, 1942, 1945, 1965, until 1976, when one of the novel's heroes, an aging youth of the revolution, volunteers to go to do some killing in East Timor (about the time when Eka was born).

There is a *petrus* mentioned, the state-licensed killing of *premans*, the state-unlicensed ones. There is *relokasi* in the background of the story, as the poor from slums are washed away to make space for the rich; Jokowi is not called by name. Further into the past, and this is the book's perspective, there appear demoralization, stealing, and smuggling: of "TVs, wristwatches, copra, even flip-flops," the National Revolution before the disillusion, the Japanese, the Dutch.

There is a complete catalog of history, like a telephone book, endless and increasingly boring pages, as if taken from a New Order high-school textbook. A reader might drink more coffee, become inattentive, and then, without a warning: "now there is a little romance"—a moment of crashing, ghosts appear, sex happens, and time gives off a smell.

As I held Eka's bulky book in my hand, I wished that he had published his novel in that kind of serialized notebooks, looking dirty, or well-read, even before the first copy sold, ever ready to be put in a pocket on the go, the Marco-like, Dickens-like *roman picisan* that I used to spot at the homes of aging freedom-fighters whom I interviewed in Bandung, Jakarta, Medan, Cirebon, and Surabaya. Eka's readers, it seems, have solid shelves.

About one quarter of the way into the book, after one of those slow-moving, textbook-ish descriptions, this one about the events leading to the proclamation of the independence in August 1945, the reader is thrown into another "now a little romance" story. Several Peta-corps volunteers, wandering along the coast, wonder—now that Japan has capitulated—what to do with themselves:

Shodancho just finished taking a shit in a coral reef when he came across a man's corpse, tossed ashore by the wave. The corpse already so swollen that it looked like it was about to explode ... wearing nothing but a loincloth ... There was a deep wound in his stomach. "That's a slash of a bayonet," said Shodancho. "He was killed by the Japanese ... maybe he slept with Kaiser Hirohito's mistress."

All of a sudden Shodancho fell silent, looking at the corpse's face. He was obviously a native, his face was gaunter as if he hadn't had enough to eat, like most of the natives ... But ... what interested [Shodancho] ... was the odd shape of the man's mouth. "This man is sucking on something." With significant effort he pried open the corpse's stiff jaws with his fingers.

... he groped around the corpse's mouth and removed a scrap of paper that had almost completely disintegrated. "He was killed for this," said Shodancho. He spread out the paper on top of a warm piece of coral ... Then he read ... "PROCLAMATION: WITH THIS WE THE PEOPLE ... SUKARNO HATTA."

This is an outrageously improbable story. Impossible. It simply could not happen like this. And yet, this half-page, this break in the flow of writing, is the closest to the best I have ever read about the moment of the proclamation of Indonesian independence; the best, including the very good one by my beloved George Kahin, and my beloved Ben Anderson; including the good ones by Anthony Reid, John Legge, Sidik Kertapati, Mohammad Yamin, or even by Sukarno (his description of Guntur Sukarnoputra pissing on Bung Hatta's lap notwithstanding). Facts just were not allowed to obstruct the way to truth!

As far as the music of the book goes, there is not much gamelan. Dissonance throughout makes the novel resound.

There is not much of a landscape, either, but it may be Eka's careful writing. It is all streets of a small Javanese town on the north side of the island, just houses and shops, front and back; porches, gardens, and garbage dumps. Sun and moon are only the glimmers of light they make on the walls and through the streets. The breeze coming from the hills, the fields, and the sea is a small-town breeze. It matters only as far as the walls of the town let it matter; façades either whitewashed or covered with writings, *écriture*: at the time of Revolution, "Freedom or Death" appears in many places; and, on the brothel, "Make Love or Die."

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The story gets heavy (with smells, carnality, and meaning) as ghosts and people gather at one moment in one place. The town cemetery becomes crowded with mourners and ghosts; mass graves are dug, "extremely large pits"; it is the fall of 1965 and the spring of 1966, of course. These are not the first widows in the novel, who gather now at the cemetery. Some are already part of the novel in previous chapters, those "whose husbands had died in the Deli dirt, or been thrown into Boven-Digoel." But now they are beyond counting.

Comrade Kliwon (*Kamerad* Kliwon, not *Saudara* Kliwon, Eka is very careful with his language) is the novel's communist villain and male protagonist. He is loosely of the *Indo* line, too; at least by default, by his love for one of the heroine's daughters. He is one of the ghosts, kind of, too. His dead father, who had been killed in action, sends a comrade to induct the young Kliwon into the Communist Party. Much of what happens to Kliwon next in the novel is improbable, naïve, and paper thin, like much of the Party ideology. But then comes—not "a little romance"—but the murders.

This reads a little like a writer's time-shifting trick, but things were happening that way in Indonesia. Comrade Kliwon, now a leader of the local fishermen's union

and chairman of the local branch of the Communist Party, is seen sitting at the party headquarters and waiting for a newspaper to arrive, the October 1 issue of *Harian Rakyat*.

Comrade Kliwon is lucky. He survives the killings, survives the Buru camp, and returns with the last group of the released prisoners. He is back helping the local fishermen, and he still waits for the newspaper. He gets into the business of sewing swim trunks on his new Singer machine; at the bottom of the leg of each of the trunks he prints *Halimandu*, the name of the town. He sells them wholesale to the souvenir kiosks along the seashore, for the little people to make some money. Tourists like it. Papa Suharto (grandpa, in Eka's case) is smiling.

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The Indonesian Revolution sinks in filth, slowly, and with business reviving. Except that Comrade Kliwon suddenly, illogically, in a spasm of rage, moves to destroy himself and anybody he can reach, in the community and along the line. This is the way in which the book emits a ray of hope. The *Indo* line comes to an end, as does *that* revolution, and the people of the town are left to themselves. It is as brutal as Eka feels it has to be. There is no other way to do it well. Babies are born dead, before they can be given a name. Some are stolen by dogs. The ghosts leave.

There is a glimmer of hope in the book, because of the very fact that, in post-Suharto and post-*Reformasi* Indonesia, it could have been written at all. It is absolutely literary (like Absolut Vodka, there is something pure). *Ajaks*, the "wild dogs" of the book, the ones who gave me nightmares, as everyone knowing Indonesia knows, "in fact," are pitiful creatures who only eat carrion; the people of the book are wild, too, only because Eka wrote them thus. The ghosts are there because Eka wrote them. The book is a pure, or high-grade at least, gesture of literature. Shodancho, at first a youth of the revolution and then the leader of anti-communist gangs, orders everything in Comrade Kliwon's Party Headquarters to be burned—*except two boxes of books on martial arts*.

*Beauty Is a Wound* gives hope, *political* hope, because of the language in which it is written. The Japanese army is described as marching to the Dutch Indies in 1942, "like a tiger pissing on its expanding territory." A revolutionary guerilla on the run (Anderson's *pemoeda*) is written by Eka as "an ancient man," exhausted, "with hair that was going every which way, matted and tied back with a wilted, yellow leaf," "wearing shoes like the ones the Gurkha force wore during the war, way too big for his feet." As the revolution fades away and demoralized revolutionaries descend into smuggling, they, writes Eka, and one almost hears him crying, "even steal sandals outside the mosque." It is impossible to imagine even Pramoedya, Chairil, Tan Malaka, Idroes, or Marco writing like that. Because they were not born so late in their country's history.

But most of all, it is Ayu Dewi what/who makes the book a real thing. Her name means, of course, "Beautiful Goddess," and she is some goddess, indeed. Not with a "flaming womb," as those effeminate princesses of the Javanese (and Indo) legends were supposed to have. But some womb she has! It's warm and welcoming. She is the whore who mothered three daughters and who carries the *Indo* curse throughout the story. This is she, who dug for the Dutch treasure in the shithole. When the Japanese

put her in a brothel with a group of Dutch and Dutch-native women, she advises them on how to handle the males. "Tell them tales," she says, "like Scheherezade." If the women say that they do not know how to tell stories, she suggests that they play cards with the men. And when they say they cannot even play cards, she says: "Flip the scales, *You rape them.*"

Ayu Dewi is the Mother Courage and she loves each of her daughters, the fruit of rape: "'this is all what was left to me by them,' she says softly," with "them" meaning the people, the rapists, who passed through her life. At a certain point in her life, at a certain point of history, tired of the life and the history, she decides that she will give birth to no more children. When she gets pregnant anyway (we did mention the womb, and that she is a whore), she prays for the most un-cute baby imaginable, "ugly as a turd," she prays, and "her daughter was exactly what she had hoped for." Ayu Dewi dies, but after twenty years, she comes back from her grave: "She missed her child, the fourth one."

Ayu Dewi is a whore and she remains a whore throughout the war, the revolution, the Old Order, the New Order, *Reformasi*, and into Eka's time. She makes men happy, and she makes women happy, because the men are happy. She makes the whole town "harmonious," men come to the brothel from far away and there is no end to it. She knows that "to be a whore you have to love everybody, everything, all of it ... " She is *Ibu Indonesia*, Mother Indonesia if there ever was one. She is courage and love and she is the most beautiful. The beauty is a wound.