
FICTION, JOURNALISM, HISTORY: A PROCESS OF SELF-CORRECTION

Seno Gumira Ajidarma

translated by Michael H. Bodden¹

Writers, it turns out, can be very arrogant. At least, that's what I felt about myself when I re-read the following thoughts:

When journalism is gagged, literature must speak. Because if journalism speaks with facts, literature speaks with the truth. Facts can be embargoed, manipulated, or blacked out, but the truth arises of its own accord, like reality. Journalism is bound by a thousand and one constraints, from business concerns to politics, from making its presence felt, but the only constraint on literature is one's own honesty. Books can be banned, but truth and literature are a part of the very air we breathe, they can't be taken to court and they can't be stopped. Covering up the facts is a political act, covering up the truth is one of the greatest acts of stupidity committed by human beings on the face of the Earth.

Literature lives in our thoughts. In the lengthy span of human history literary truth always soars up on its own out of the hubbub of all the things programmed into us in great detail through the mass media. Even the most sophisticated mass media engineering will quickly melt away like ice cream, but literature written on toilet paper in distant landscapes of exile, from Buru island to Siberia, from moment to moment will make itself visible, will speak in every language in the four corners of the world. Don't misunderstand me, I'm not making writers out to be heroes, but only pointing to the presence of literature. Every time a writer is

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beheaded, the truth in literature will reincarnate itself in the minds of a thousand other writers—that is, anyone who is “cursed” to write down the truth.

This long quote comes from a short essay, “Literature’s Life in Thought,” which was published in a collection of my essays *When Journalism is Silenced, Literature Must Speak*.² In the statement it seems there is an exaggerated faith in the ability of literature to grasp hold of truth. That’s the first charge. The second charge is: in the essay it’s taken for granted that I already understand what the thing called truth really is—even though when I try to confirm my assumption, it turns out I can never reach an understanding about truth that satisfies me.

It turns out that you can’t ride herd on the truth like you would on cattle. In my efforts to come to an understanding, I almost always arrive at the human condition as the furthest horizon: I’ll never be able to see beyond that horizon, for whatever I know is lodged between myself and the limits of that horizon, and no matter how scientific it may be, it is only human knowledge—and I’m never certain to what extent the human perspective is valid, concerning even a little speck of the truth.

That’s why I no longer make an issue of how literature can grasp truth. What concerns me is how literature comes to be present, and how can it justify this presence—a question which can be reformulated as: what can a writer say about a text which he/she has written him/herself, by way of taking responsibility for it? If I am that writer, what can I do? I can only tell the story of the process by which that piece of writing was born.

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On the back cover of my novel, *Jazz, Perfume, and an Incident*,³ I wrote the following sentence: if you want to call it fiction, fine, if you want to regard it as fact, that’s up to you—it’s only a metropolitan novel. The book was published at the beginning of 1997, in the pre-reform days, when every person involved in the printing of each and every word about real conditions had to be extraordinarily careful. Including me, who had already had an experience with a text concerning those same real conditions.

The text concerned, for example, went like this:

When the shooting started I was in front, but I managed to get away and enter the graveyard. I didn’t count how many were dead, but they were a great many. And the volleys of gunfire went in all directions.

At the time of the shooting they were divided into two rows, one in front and one in the rear. Their commanding officer fired once into the air, shouting, “Front row down, back row fire!” When the rear row fired, the front row attacked and thrust

² Seno Gumira Ajidarma, *Ketika Jurnalisme Dibungkam Sastra Harus Bicara* (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Bentang Budaya, 1997).

³ For bibliographical information on the books Ajidarma mentions in this speech, please refer to Michael H. Bodden’s introductory essay, “Seno Gumira Ajidarma and Fictional Resistance to an Authoritarian State in 1990s Indonesia,” in this issue.

their bayonets at the demonstrators. I'd only been able to run about blindly, because people were going down like flies as they were hit, just like in a film.

This text is one of fifteen testimonies about the Dili incident of 12 November 1991 in East Timor, which was reported in the magazine *Jakarta-Jakarta*. As a result of reports of this sort I and two journalist friends were dismissed from our work as editors of the magazine, and moreover were not allowed to work for *Jakarta-Jakarta* for almost two years, because we were regarded as having done wrong in letting the reports go through. In other words, these were texts which were forbidden. I describe this case in greater detail in the document, "Jakarta-Jakarta and the Dili Incident," which is also included as an introduction to the Australian edition of *Eyewitness*. However, the relevance of the above is: the way in which I reworked the aforementioned journalistic reports, which are ordinarily considered factual, into a fictional format.

The following is a passage from the short story, "History Lesson":

Teacher Alfonso hadn't forgotten the incident. How could he? When the shooting started they were divided into two rows, front and back. Their commanding officer fired once into the air, shouting, "Front row down, back row fire!" After the rear row fired, the front row attacked and thrust their bayonets at the crowd. Teacher Alfonso hadn't forgotten. He'd only been able to run about blindly, because people were going down like flies, sprawled everywhere . . .

Here you can see, I really intended to shove history right in the readers' faces: a factual text termed a journalistic report was virtually unchanged when I slipped it into a fiction. Later, I quoted a raw, pre-magazine-publication version of that same text in the novel *Jazz, Perfume, and an Incident*. Observe:

When the shooting started I was in front, but I managed to get away and enter the graveyard. I didn't count how many were dead, but they were a great many. And the volleys of gunfire went in all directions. There were two kinds of soldiers. Those not wearing shirts and carrying weapons, they were most numerous, and it was they who shot us. There were also some wearing uniforms and carrying long knives, similar to bayonets.

At the time of the shooting they were divided into two rows, front and back. Their commanding officer fired once into the air, shouting, "Front row down, back row fire!" After the rear row fired, the front row attacked and thrust their bayonets at the crowd. And I'd only been able to run about blindly, because people were going down like flies as they were hit, just like in a film.

About five to ten minutes after the shooting stopped, they cordoned off the cemetery so that no one could escape. When they discovered someone still alive, including me, they ordered us to strip naked, while threatening us with "Start saying your prayers, your time is up, you're all going to die!"

I'll stop my reading of this passage here, because what follows is terrifying. It's already enough if you understand what I'm trying to convey: a text from the category *journalism* doesn't have to be greatly altered in order to be transferred into a short story or novel format. Of course what's even more important is this question—why wasn't the journalistic text changed at all? My answer is: I'm never entirely aware that

I'm creating a short story or a novel. I only feel that I'm resisting being silenced. I concentrate completely on ensuring that the forbidden text which has been banned can be disseminated—in a way that is safe and according to the rules. I choose not to publish anonymous leaflets, because I'm not an activist. I can only write, and I write to confront silencing. I'm gagged in the official print media, and I'm happy to resist in the same place—something which I can mainly do through my short stories, which to be sure, only find a place in the newspapers. The fact that I didn't seem satisfied, and repeated the report virtually in its entirety in a novel, I regard as my paying off the final installment of my debt to history. Under such circumstances the difference between fact and fiction doesn't hold much meaning for me, maybe it doesn't mean anything at all. What I do through both journalism and fiction forms my answer to the demands of temporality—which for me means my responsibility to history.

Now the problem is, when writing what is called "literature" do I always transfer raw facts like this? To be honest, the text above is in no way my own writing. That text is a report text filed by a journalist who interviewed the eyewitnesses in Dili. What was my role in all this? Please excuse me if this discussion turns into something like a workshop, but I really feel the need to explain several techniques which I find necessary not because I want to be stylistically innovative, but rather to dodge the giant harrow which may be made to sweep down from the heavens at any moment.

I'll quote once more the text from the above report:

. . . all around me, people were falling down as they were hit, just like in a film
 . . .

In the short story "Eyewitness" (*Saksi Mata*⁴), I developed this fact into the following dialogue:

"Do you, Mr. Eyewitness, still remember everything that happened even though you've no longer got any eyes?"

"I do sir."

"Do you remember how they fired wildly and people toppled like felled banana trees?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you still remember how blood flowed, and people groaned and those who were still half alive were stabbed to death?"

You should know that the text on *those who were still half alive and were stabbed to death* represents facts which were included in the *Jakarta-Jakarta* report. Actually, the structure of the short story "Eyewitness" is all fictive, except that I organized it so that I could include the above dialogue, which has its source in facts. This is just an example of how I played with narrative techniques, which are of course not particularly special. Whereas, for the novel *Jazz, Perfume and an Incident*, you can see a structure which consists of a parallelization of the involvement of the character "I" in three strands: one an essay on jazz, the second a fiction about women and their perfumes, and the third reports by a woman journalist about an incident. Of course the strands about jazz and perfume are only there to throw the eye of the censor off the

⁴ *Saksi Mata*, as Benedict Anderson has pointed out to me, can also be translated literally as "Witness of the Eyes," which offers an ironic gloss on the contents of the story.

track of what I was fighting for: to publish all the reports of the incident in their entirety. As for the reports of the incident themselves, I rewove them in a way that made them safe. For example:

So, I continued my work, reading. Because I was still drowsy, I read haphazardly here and there. Eh, it seems this report is in English.

DISAPPEARANCES AND EXTRAJUDICIAL EXECUTIONS

The identity of at least 100 civilians, and possibly as many as 250, killed by—censored by the writer—forces in the—censored by the writer—massacre and its immediate aftermath remains unresolved. (More than eighteen months after the—censored by the writer—was set up,—censored by the writer—has yet to identify the vast majority of those killed).

The—censored by the writer—has also failed to resolve the fate of more than 200 people who reportedly “disappeared” after the massacre.

The text above is a report from Amnesty International, whose activities up to the time when I was writing, of course, were not seen with much favor by the executioners. By “writing a novel” like that, I don’t at all feel that I’m a fiction writer, much less a writer of literature. I’m only a writer with a few cagey tricks for getting the facts out. Still one trick, the phrase “censored by the writer” throws into sharp relief the bitter irony of the way a writer has to censor his/her own writings—and that’s merely a secondary trick, just so that the novel appears to have an air of the literary about it.

And so, from fact to fiction, what occurs is only a change of how the facts are framed, a change of format. In the practice of writing, one can only apply a little make-up, as I’ve shown with the three texts (the journalistic report, the short story, and the novel) which are almost exactly the same, though in fact one can develop them without ever losing the keys for unlocking the door of reality—like a majority of the stories in *Eyewitness (Saksi Mata)*. The reader who finds those keys will recognize it as factual, while the reader who doesn’t find them—and to be sure one doesn’t need to—will find only fiction. I assume that both can return the reader to the life around them.

* * *

This work of mine has consequently been called literature that expresses reality, sometimes it’s openly called “East Timor” even though I never ever mentioned that name—but to what extent have I avoided manipulating all of this? I mean: haven’t I actually been herding the reader towards the conviction that what I write here is true fact? The problem is, what kind of guarantee is there that what I write in my own version is the true version? As a piece of writing, my piece is only one among many, but if it is believed to be conveying reality, what can guarantee that it comes closest to the truth? Provisionally, I’ve come to be of the opinion that it’s impossible to reach the truth. What is necessary to make that belief valid? How can people put more faith in fiction than in fact?

Permit me to advance the opinion that both facts and fiction are only ways in which humanity gives meaning to the world and its own life. Within that meaning are contained human concepts and interpretations. Facts span a continuum from journalistic reports to the results of the most scientific research. Fiction, in human culture, has already come in a thousand and one shapes. Facts are accepted based on a consensus which we've already agreed upon, a consensus about the way in which everything that makes sense is received as reality. Fiction has no consensus, because there is no single category or criterion anywhere which can encapsulate the imagination, though there is a consensus that by a certain method of interpretation according to particular conventions, we can regard fiction as reflecting reality back to us.

But I have to say here that the reality reflected by facts as well as fiction, according to my conception of the truth, is a reality in brackets. We cannot yet assume that it is the essence of reality, if that which we term essence even exists. If my fiction convinces You that everything contained within it reflects reality, that's only because of my skill at pulling the wool over your eyes. Who can guarantee that I'm not pushing my own interests? For me, East Timor perhaps doesn't manifest itself as a question of universal humanity, rather it is a very personal issue. It may be that I'm not defending humanity, but only quarreling with a few executives of the business for which I work: that I'm disseminating the text which they forbid. Let us hope this isn't merely a case of interpersonal prestige. Only that. So many things have happened since the Dili Incident, from the shooting of farmers in Madura to the slaughter in Bosnia, why am I dealing only with the Dili Incident? Because that case has become a personal problem. And even if now my attention seems to have shifted from East Timor, moving on to the problem of the systematic terror inflicted by troops of "ninjas," to the rape of Chinese women, the serial murders of Islamic scholars in East Java, the provocations inflicted on the student movement, and the public revelations of the incidents of extreme cruelty in Aceh—indeed there is something in all of these things which, whether directly or not, has become personal. To the extent that I feel all of these events have become intimate to me emotionally, whether I like it or not, they'll become writings. For example, later on I wrote the short stories "Clara or the Woman Who Was Raped," or "The Tale of a Phone Tapper," or *Tumirah, Esteemed Brothel Owner*, a play script which adapted these problems and was staged. It turns out that theatre is really effective as a medium for social criticism. What can I do, I really just write whatever passes through my mind. Actually, I, too, want to write poetry about flowers, but what flows through my life is a river of blood — so what can I say? That's the only morality which I can sell in the midst of my powers of manipulation as a writer: that I cannot deceive myself. And in that instant history makes its presence felt as temporality, as a presentness which demands my answer as a writer. My answer is to write.

However, both facts and fiction are still human constructs, not reality itself. It's interesting to add that evidently, neither facts nor fiction can make an absolute claim on reality. Reality brings itself to presence, presents itself within history, through an uninterrupted process of communication. Whatever the fact, whichever the fiction, they're only a link in that chain of communication. Here it becomes clear that whatever we assume to be reality must be placed within brackets—in the sense that it becomes very relative. And so, if the construction of reality can only be believed in as a symbol in the midst of a hurly-burly process of perceiving and interpreting, what is there to which we can still hold fast within a text? To be exact, what is the morality behind the

making of a particular text? It turns out that the answer is still just a cliché: freedom and honesty. Whether I'm really free perhaps can still be investigated. Whether I'm honest, only I know—but at least I've tried to confess.

During the ceremony honoring the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize winner from Indonesia, Bishop Belo, who fights for peace in East Timor, Father Mangunwijaya read my short story, "Misteri Kota Ningi" (The Mystery of the Town of Ningi). That story made use of a statistic about the population of the East Timorese city, Dili, which, in the midst of explosive population growth, turned out mysteriously to be suffering a net loss of total population over time. That statistic was published in research by George Junus Aditjondro, an activist who always marshals facts accurately. For me, it was extremely interesting to re-present this fact, and in that fiction I gave life to the total of that decline in the form of wandering spirits—complete with the correction of some factual carelessness in Aditjondro's report. I was only inspired by the desire to play around a bit. However, it seems that this fiction was felt to represent reality. Can we accept this? Even though I also intended to shove history right in the readers' faces.

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I've already warned you that whatever reality you're convinced of through my writings should be put in brackets. We live in a world of meanings, everything is a symbol which may always be critically reinterpreted: even more so in my case since I write everything out of the intensity of my concerns, the concerns of a person who feels oppressed and resists, perhaps rather recklessly. This background should be enough to convince you that what I write is hardly objective. Don't put too much faith in me. I'm just having you on. But even so, in no way does this diminish my right to go on chatting with you as part of my freedom. And in closing these notes, I'll indeed talk about freedom.

A while ago you heard the term pre-reform. When you hear that word you probably assume that in the reform era now occurring, there is a greater guarantee of freedom. All I can say is that the current situation in Indonesia is far more dangerous than before. Apparently we are a people that, aside from being fairly superstitious, also really enjoy violence. With every passing day it becomes more apparent that violence doesn't only exist as criminality, but as our culture. Perhaps it makes no sense to think that violence can become a culture. However, in the flare up of that violence any voice that rejects violence is almost gagged by voices that not only endorse it, but also are directly involved in it. It's as though violence can only be overcome by violence. Nowadays in Indonesia there's an impression that if students die as a result of taking part in a demonstration, well, that's just the normal risk involved. Without any feeling of having done something wrong, society can cut off the head of someone they think is a "ninja," then parade it around the town—and nobody thinks twice about such reports. As though it's a normal event among so many others.

This situation is truly horrifying. It seems as though freedom has given birth to anarchy. More than one hundred political parties have emerged to press shamelessly their own interests, while almost all the phrases of political discourse uniformly represent the crowing of fighting cocks before they lunge at one another. The freedom

that has emerged is the freedom for everyone to oppress his neighbor. All groups are reluctant to relinquish any opportunity to grab their slice of power. The hundreds of newspapers sold on the streets are full of slander and abuse. Politics has become a giant, red-hot frying pan, but not everyone realizes it. Critical activists are now more often emotional than calmly analytic. It's as though Indonesia fulfills not one single criterion for its own salvation, possessing only the conditions for destruction. Can you imagine that in order to meet their pressing economic needs, people have been forced to loot the railway tracks and sell them as iron?

Indonesian culture is now threatened by anti-culture. The journalism which not so long ago was so cowed suddenly emerges with a rhetoric that knows no bounds, and the mass media that grow like fungus in the rainy season provide no hope for the development of culture, in fact they destroy it—there is little which appears that takes even a moment to pause and reflect and cool down the atmosphere: there's no place for literature. This is an irony of the reform period. The space for culture in the mass media shrinks, despite the fact that cultural activity is very lively—perhaps as a form of resistance towards the violent outbreak of anti-culture. The exaggerated priority given to politics in the mass media is of a very quantitative character: the articles are many, long, but don't really say much. In several instances they seem to take the side of factual reality within the dichotomy of factual reality and imaginative fiction. Though in fact the factual is also only a construction—if not to say a complete fabrication. This makes me feel more and more marginalized. However, in my opinion, those who are now contributing to the growth of Indonesia are precisely those who restrain themselves from adding to the textual confusion in the huge flow of narratives. We need tiny rays of light in the dark corners of history. In practice, I don't place my activities in cultural centers or in the media with large circulations: I write about little known theatre events, short films, topics that aren't very current, all of which are usually rejected by the larger media because of the journalistic criterion that demands that one go with the times—so it shouldn't be surprising if my writings are only published in marginal media, performance programs, or evaporate into thin air after a discussion has ended. Don't even think about publishing books. Honestly, I'm just a marginal writer.

In other words, it turns out we still need to struggle for a freedom that is worth something, a freedom in which every person has a stake in the freedom of others. Of course for me, freedom only has meaning through struggle. Because a freedom given as a gift is no longer freedom, but merely a kind of sanctuary. Therefore, it doesn't make sense for people to ask for freedom. Human beings have to struggle to create a space of freedom. Actually, writers are always doing something of that sort when they write. The text itself is not important, because the text is only a product. The process is what counts, because it is a human process: how human beings live with the possibilities given them, that is, the possibilities to be free. In my case, I've already taken the freedom to accuse myself, so that whosoever is taken in by all the deceptions of my fiction to the extent that they've begun to regard it as reality, may be liberated. This too, is a part of my responsibility towards history. However, if in the end you still believe in them anyway, what can I do about it, don't blame me. Thank you.