

Goenawan Mohamad, *Sidelines: Writings from Tempo, Indonesia's Banned Magazine*, translated by Jennifer Lindsay, foreword by Bruce Grant. South Melbourne/Victoria: Hyland House in Association with the Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, 1994. xv, 240 pp.

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Modern Indonesian literature is often understood to consist only of fictional genres like novels and short stories, poems or plays. Traditionally, however, the term *sastera* meant more: it encompassed also bills (*undang-undang*), political treatises (*risalah politik*) and social criticism (*kritikan sosial*).¹ In fact, one of the central original connotations of *sastera* seems to have been to convey instruction and information.² Therefore Indonesian journalistic genres can also be regarded as literary phenomena.³ In modern Indonesia, the periodical opinion columns sometimes show impressive aesthetic qualities, and they prove how sophisticated the country's journalism can be. A very good example of the high art of Indonesian columnry can be found in the essays of Goenawan Mohamad, whose column "Catatan Pinggir" is well known for its philosophical depth, its witty ways of argumentation, and its compositional complexity. As the regular column of the editor-in-chief of *Tempo*, Indonesia's most influential news magazine of the Suharto era, its political importance was obvious. Since the banning of *Tempo* in 1994, "Catatan Pinggir" appears in the unlicensed magazine *Independen*. Over all the years, the column has been something like a weekly meditation on current affairs, reflecting the deeds and misdeeds, the successes and catastrophes of New Order Indonesia. Therefore Goenawan Mohamad's column also offers foreigners a good way of studying some of the core values of public opinion in modern Indonesia.

For this reason, Jennifer Lindsay's translation of 106 selected columns will be welcome to the English-reading public.⁴ The sections of the book give an overview of the central themes of modern Indonesia: identity and change, democracy and freedom, beliefs, history and its meaning, and international (aspects). As the essays were selected with the cooperation of the author, Goenawan Mohamad, an authentic sampling is assured. However, this does not guarantee a perfectly representative sample of the hundreds of articles that appeared since 1976.⁵ Indonesian readers especially will notice which selections were chosen and which omitted, since so many Indonesians read the originals in

¹ Muhammad Haji Salleh, *Puitika Sastera Melayu. Suatu Pertimbangan* (Edisi Kedua, Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1992), p. 14.

² A. Teeux, *Sastra dan Ilmu Sastra* (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1984), p. 23. For a discussion of more definitions of Melayu-Indonesian terms for "literature," see also Muhammad Haji Salleh, *Puitika Sastera Melayu*, pp. 115 ff.

³ Also in Western countries, the term *literature* [*littérature, Literatur*. . .] as it developed, especially from the 1970s onward, has been increasingly understood as comprising everything that is expressed with letters—a definition that is derived from the literal meaning of the word. The consequence is that now not only fictional forms are the subject of literary science, but also the "new" forms. See for example, H. Belke, *Literarische Gebrauchsformen* (Düsseldorf, 1973); P. Bürgel, *Literarische Kleinprosa* (Tübingen, 1983); E. Rohmer, *Die Literarische Glosse. Untersuchungen zu Begriffsgeschichte, Funktion und Literarizität einer Textsorte* (Erlangen, 1988), p. 11.

⁴ A German translation of *Catatan Pinggir* by Werner Wasmuth appeared in 1993; it included thirty-five of Goenawan's essays. See Goenawan Mohammad, *Am Rande be. Thirty-Five Essays über Kultur, Politik und Gesellschaft Indonesiens*, edited and translated by Werner Wasmuch (Unkel/Rhine, Bad Honnef: Horlemann, 1993).

⁵ In 1977, the previous name of the column, "Fokus Kita," was changed to "Catatan Pinggir."

Tempo and have also had available to them the three volumes of "Catatan Pinggir" columns included in collections in 1982, 1989 and 1991.⁶

The English version is focused on those subjects that might be of special interest for foreigners. This thematic orientation is apparent not only from the titles, but also from other evidence inside the published columns. For example, in many of the opening sentences of the essays chosen, a number of non-Indonesian countries—Japan, India, countries in the West and others—are mentioned. It is typical of Goenawan's style, however, that these elements of his universe are combined in an unexpected, even exasperating manner. Well-known images are presented in a new way and often paired with odd details, so that their connotations alter, as in the "Catatan Pinggir" column titled "Australia" (pp. 215 ff.), the first in the "International" section. Exactly how should a reader respond to a challenging introductory sentence like "In Australia there are camels and happiness"? Surprises of this kind unsettle a reader's stereotypical perceptions not only of foreign countries, but also of Indonesian culture and society. Goenawan Mohamad's writings do not offer simple explanations for the phenomena of this world. There is always a certain ambiguity, a vagueness in his description and comments. Even Indonesian readers of "Catatan Pinggir" must sometimes think twice in order to determine which meanings out of a range of possible meanings are actually intended in these essays. Not only writing, but also reading "Catatan Pinggir" is an art of its own.

For foreign readers, therefore, it might be quite difficult to detect the underlying messages in the columns. But as there are several layers of meaning, even readers in culturally different contexts will be able to comprehend Goenawan's columns in their own ways. Moreover, in the skillfully translated English edition, explanations are provided for unfamiliar terms and circumstances. The foreword by Bruce Grant and the introduction by Jennifer Lindsay add more useful information about "Catatan Pinggir" and its political and cultural context. As the banning of *Tempo* is never mentioned in these parts of the book, however, it is quite obvious that the whole edition was conceived before that decisive event.

But it is just as obvious that the book was entitled and designed after the banning of *Tempo*, for the cover expresses the spirit of the struggle to protect an endangered critical voice. In red and orange colours before a contrasting background, the title of the book has been designed to suggest a banner headline: *Sidelines: Writings from Tempo, Indonesia's banned magazine*. The names of the author and translator are in comparatively small letters at the lower side of the book. The reader's attention is attracted by a sentence in blue letters which signals a half-hidden, conspiratorial message: "We are living in a time when to think is a strange, even dangerous activity." This danger can be localised from the illustration on the cover, which shows an edition of *Tempo* with the title "KEKERASAN POLITIK DAN PEMILU" (political violence and the general elections) underneath a green map of Indonesia, with a large section of Northern Australia visible nearby. The strangeness and danger associated with Indonesian press and politics appear to be threatening Australia. Did a certain perception of Indonesia in the Australian public provide the background for this edition of Goenawan Mohamad's essays? And, as the text at the back of the cover addresses only Western readers, does this edition thereby fail to address other non-Western English-reading publics, for example readers in India, the Philippines or in Singapore?

Fortunately, non-Indonesian readers who might have been initially attracted to the book by the dangers signaled on the cover are given the opportunity to learn something

⁶ In 1995 a fourth collection of "Catatan Pinggir" appeared, covering the period up to the closing of *Tempo* in June 1994.

different about Indonesia by opening this collection and reading it. Goenawan Mohamad does not write about “culture” or “politics” in a narrow sense. His moral judgments always take into account the possibility that oneself can be weak or wrong. Goenawan’s preferred style of asking questions about the world is multi-layered and poly-interpretable. He gives no easy answers, no certainties and offers no slogans as truths. Readers should know—and they certainly will know after reading these essays—that many more possible interpretations than the ones suggested on the fiery cover are intended by this complex author.

