THE FACTORY

Nh. Dini

Translated by David T. Hill

Translator's Introductory Comments

Born Nurhayati Srihardini in Semarang on February 29, 1936, Dini later attributed her interest in storytelling to her earliest memories of watching traveling theater companies, and listening to traditional legends and family tales recounted by her parents or older sister.[1] When her father died just prior to her entry to junior high school in 1950, she became somewhat introverted and began writing stories to work through those emotions. Having begun in her teens to contribute poems and stories to various small magazines and the local Semarang radio station, she established her national reputation as a competent writer of short fiction at the age of 20 with her first published collection *Dua Dunia* [Two worlds] (1956), reinforcing this with the serialization of her short novel *Hati yang damai* [Peaceful heart] four years later.

When she moved to Jakarta to train as a Garuda Airlines stewardess in 1956 she merged easily into the male-dominated literary circles of the capital. She participated enthusiastically in the coffee shop debates and literary conferences, frequently accompanied by her life-long friend, poet, and publisher, Ayip Rosidi.

Her marriage to a French diplomat, Yves Coffin, in 1960 gave her the opportunity to embrace world citizenship. Dini lived abroad for two decades in Japan, Cambodia, the Philippines, the United States, and France, raising two children: a daughter, Marie-Claire Lintang (born in 1961) and a son Pierre-Louis Padang (1967). She continued to write nonetheless, completing a string of successful novels published (with the strong encouragement of Ayip Rosidi) during the 1970s, including the best-seller, *Pada Sebuah Kapal* [On a Boat] (1973), *La Barka* (1975), *Keberangkatan* [Departure] (1977), and *Namaku Hiroko* [My Name is Hiroko] (1979). She also commenced a series of autobiographical tales ('rangkaian cerita kenangan'), beginning with *Sebuah Lorong di Kotaku* [A Lane in my Town] (1978).

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[1] Dini describes these early influences in "Naluri yang mendasari Penciptaan," in *Proses Kreatif: Mengapa dan Bagaimana Saya Mengarang*, ed. Pamusuk Eneste (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1983, pp. 110–24.)

In 1977, while her husband was consul-general in Detroit, they separated and she moved back, alone, to Paris where she supported herself as a "Dame de Compagnie," a governess for the elderly. In February 1980 she returned to Indonesia, with a determination to survive on the proceeds from her writing. Four years later her divorce was finalized and she settled back into her family home in Kampung Sekayu, Semarang. There, in 1986, she established the Pondok Baca Nh. Dini [Nh. Dini Reading Hut], a modest children's library.[2] In 1990 her various achievements were recognized nationally with an Arts Award from the Indonesian Department of Education and Culture.

Dini remains a sought-after writer of short stories and freelance articles for popular magazines and newspapers in Indonesia, which has enabled her to travel widely around the archipelago. Since her return to Indonesia her output has included a biography of the poet Amir Hamzah, *Amir Hamzah: Pangeran dari Seberang* [The Prince from across the water] (1981), several collections of short stories, such as *Tuileries* (1982) which draws heavily on her experiences abroad, and major novels like *Orang-orang Tran* [The Transmigrants] (1985) and *Jalan Bandungan* [Bandungan Street] (1989), firmly rooted in the political problems of New Order Indonesia.

Yet explicit political preoccupations have never been a driving force in Dini's life nor in her writing. "When I write," she said in a 1981 interview, "it is more a matter of social relations, of pointing to those things which I regard as unjust. . . . That's what the themes of my stories are really about, about life itself. Injustice, because that exists. About injustice between men and women, that's what I want to point out. But socio-economic issues, too, and love and affection because that is part of life too. I think those three things are never boring; they are perpetual themes, the classics."[3] Her comments foreshadow much that can be read into the short story that follows.

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[2] See the interview with Dini conducted by Helene van Klinken and Sri Murnining Tyas, in "Indonesian Women Today: The Struggle for Independence," *Inside Indonesia*, No. 22, March 1990, pp. 16–17.

[3] Interview with Nh. Dini, Pasar Seni, Jakarta, February 15, 1981.

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(Translated from the Indonesian by David T. Hill[5])

For the umpteenth time the man came, bringing his thin black briefcase clasped under his armpit or dangling nervously first from his left hand and then from his right. Then back again from the right to the left. This time he was not alone. He kept bowing over as he walked beside two yellow-skinned men with slanty eyes. They talked animatedly in strange accents. Off and on Ma[6] could hear them saying the word "hai." Every few minutes one of the three would say it, as if they had reached some agreement. The two with light skins Ma would have called Chinese. They looked like the soldiers whom she had known decades before, during the time when most people in the village had had to wear clothes woven coarsely from palm leaves or cut out of old gunny sacks.[7] It was only that in those days their heads were shaven and they wore uniforms. Now these men had thick black hair standing up stiffly like black sugar-palm fiber.

The three of them got out of the car which they left far back by the side of the road. Ma watched them as they walked. After making their way along the edge of the dry fields which lay side by side with Karmo's wet rice fields they headed for the house. There, of course, they would meet Sarpin. And, for the umpteenth time, they would discuss the price of land, and go looking for Ma, to flatter and try to coax her into relinquishing their fields.

But Ma will let them look for her for a while. She hid, as she usually did, in those parts of the land where the feet of city people do not care to go for fear of getting muddy. Maybe she will try something different this morning. For the past few days the clusters of corn had grown tall and thick, quite enough to shelter someone squatting there. Only when she grew tired of hiding did she reveal herself.

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[4] Originally published as "Pabrik" in Nh. Dini, *Tuileriess* (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1982), pp. 37–48.

[5] I would like to thank Nh. Dini and an anonymous reader appointed by the editor for their suggested revisions to earlier drafts of this translation.

[6] The original term is "Simak," a combination of the affectionate form of address, "si," and the Javanese and Jakartan word for mother, "mak."

[7] In this context Ma is alluding to the Japanese Occupation of Indonesia during the Second World War.

So that is what she did this time, too.

When Ma's back began to feel stiff and her feet numb, she stood up. She walked slowly to and fro, massaging her calves and thighs. Then she strode off in the direction of the roof looming far off in the middle of the greening fields.

On entering the yard Ma already knew where the men would be sitting. There were two sets of tables and chairs on the front verandah, and newcomers were always invited to sit at those on the left. It had been that way ever since the old days when Ma was just a child. Only now the furniture had changed. It was no longer made from wood or shiny bamboo shaped by the skillful hands of local people, in harmony with the rural environment which protected such traditions. The chairs now had seats and backrests colored red. "Practical," said Sarpin, "made of plastic." If they got dirty they could easily be wiped clean. The armrests and legs glistened, made of a white metal like silver. Ma did not like them. When someone sat down on this kind of chair it made a suspicious noise, as if they were farting. And on days when it was sweltering this type of chair made people feel very hot. Sitting on them was like sitting on a charcoal stove which had only just been extinguished.

But Sarpin was proud to change the furnishings. He said you have to change with the times. But the home improvements, which he had carried out little by little, had turned Ma's way of life upside down. And added to this, even the chairs had been "improved." Ma did not feel at ease anymore; she did not feel she was living in her own home. That was why she took to wandering more in the fields, in the rice paddies, circling this expanse with which she identified more intimately, which she knew and which knew her. There she would ponder, remembering the past, with its difficulties but its peace. She recalled the tranquillity of a verandah full of potted plants, bamboo chairs, and benches which gave a gentle creak whenever anyone sat down on them. But they were cool and did not stick to your skin nor leave embarrassing sweat marks behind. Then she would think about Father. Fortunately he had gone to eternal rest before her. He would not have been able to accept these changes to the house. Or would it perhaps have been better if he were still alive?

"Morning, Mother," the man said greeting her when Ma stuck her head in through the doorway.

And the two newcomers followed his glance, turning to the door and then bowing from the waist in Ma's direction.

"We have been searching for you and calling out for ages, Mother!"

Sarpin repeated the sentence he had uttered so often over these past few months. Ma noticed that this time her son did not fumble when calling her "Mother." On ordinary days, when there were no city guests visiting, he usually called her "Ma."[8]

Ma did not answer but walked over to Sarpin, who stood up and helped her over to a chair. A "pssss" sounded as her body dropped down into the seat. She placed her feet, still wet with well water, as politely as was possible. Ma also pulled here and there at the borders of her blouse.

"These gentlemen have come to repeat their offer," Sarpin explained.

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[8] The contrast in the original is between the Indonesian term "bu" (rendered "Mother") and the Javanese "mak" (rendered "Ma"). Most Javanese villagers would use the regional language of Javanese in their daily lives, adopting the national language of Indonesian (*Bahasa Indonesia*) only on more formal occasions, or in their dealings with non-Javanese outsiders.

These words too she had heard many times before, only the word "gentleman" had now become "gentlemen."

"These two visitors are from Japan. This is the director, the boss. This one here is the architect, the one who draws the sketches of the buildings."

Ma looked them both over. How small their eyes were! Their eyelids which protruded as if they were heavy, formed a thick folded layer. How could they possibly see clearly? One of them said something. This strange language that Ma had heard in the past seemed even more unusual at close range.

"I was just saying to your son, Ma'am, that these gentlemen are prepared to increase their offer."

Ma listened. She sat there because she wanted to. Because she liked to observe other people, things around her, listening to voices and conversation. But she felt absolutely no obligation to answer or comment. So she just kept her silence. Her two hands bunched modestly upon the *kain* in which she was clothed.

"The offer these men are making would be extremely profitable, Mother," continued Sarpin. "With attractive provisions for us."

"For 'us'!" Ma felt the need for clarification. "Who is 'us'?" she asked.

"Well . . . for all of us: *Mas* Dir, *Yu* Kam, *Mas* Wongso, Ma, and me."[9]

"For you! Not for me!"

"You have to look at the practical side of things, Mother," Sarpin resumed, correcting himself by addressing his mother formally.

Ma had already noticed just how much Sarpin liked the word "practical." When she heard it for the first time Ma did not know what it meant. He was talking away in the regional language and then suddenly he threw in this word from Indonesian. More and more frequently her children were using foreign words which she did not understand.

"This is the highest offer ever made to the people here by these foreign visitors, Ma'am," interrupted the man who had brought them along. "So don't let it pass you by just like that!"

Ma did not reply. She looked carefully at the man. Why do there have to be people like him in this world? Patiently and tenaciously coaxing farmers to sell their dry-fields and their land so that foreigners and Chinese could build factories there. On the slope of the mountain, towards Pingit, Karmo had already sold his rice-fields. Now there was a factory producing a reddish-yellow drink called "Fanta," when all this time in the neighboring village there was already a Chinese-Javanese person who had a business making soft drinks which had the real taste of fruit: Ambon bananas, *mandalika*, raspberries, all picked on the mountains beside the village. With the competition from such an enormous factory full of machines, the sales of the small trader had now slackened. Quite soon he would be killed off, strangled by his shrinking market.

Ma took a deep breath. It seemed that God permitted the fields to shrink so that people will not have enough to eat. Then the lean time before the harvest comes and the number of people will decline and Judgement Day itself will arrive. Then perhaps a new world will

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[9] *"Mas"* is the Javanese term for an elder brother, *"Yu"* a term for an elder sister.

arise, a new divine creation, with new people in it. Ma would have already departed this life by that stage. She did not care. But now, as long as she still breathed, the land left to her by her ancestors she would hold secure.

Dir, Kam, and Wongso had left for the city.

They had all married and sought their fortunes far from the smell of the rice-fields, wet and dry. They had tasted the accursed easy life of the city. Each time they returned home to visit Ma their children would call out in amazement whenever they saw a *pijer* butterfly, which to Ma foretold of an impending visit from afar; they would squeal in fear at the millipedes crawling on the floor of the house, which to Ma indicated that it would rain that day. On one occasion her favorite grandchild came tearing out of the outhouse in the garden. It said a frog was watching it shit.

Ma knew what her children really intended.

Sarpin, who up until this point had followed his parent's wishes and managed the land and its harvest, could not hold out much longer against the temptation of life in the city. The village was becoming deserted. One family after another had moved. Initially to the side of the road which linked the towns, then taking buses and transport trucks, sheltering by the walls of markets or stations no longer in use. Sometimes they did not care if they had any shelter or not. They had become fed up with working the land. Meanwhile, for those who were left in the village it had become harder to find the labor needed to work the ancestral rice-fields.

The times had really changed. Especially during the last ten years. More and more foreigners had appeared. They would stop to buy fruit at the road sides. The cars and small buses were often full of people with various skin colors. Those with the same colored skin as Ma would, of course, be the guides who also worked as interpreters. They always seemed respectful and apprehensive. As if these foreigners were their bosses.

Now these foreigners had put pressure on the rice-fields. Factory after factory appeared in the middle of the dry fields. Houses were built left and right for the senior employees responsible for these factories. But not that many. For the buildings were equipped with machines to replace human labor, even human brains. If any of the local people were lucky enough to be invited in to work, it was only one or two as sweepers or guards. Then strange sorts of trees would be planted; types of shrubs which produced absolutely no fruit of any kind. These were planted along the edges of the roads specially constructed to lead to the housing plots. It was even odder in their yards and gardens. Generally there were only stones and grass. Tamarinds, persimmons, and mangoes, which Pudakpayung was famous for producing in abundance, were of no interest to gentlemen newcomers from the city like these.

Ma could guess what was in her children's hearts.

They wanted to get their share of the family inheritance immediately. In the form of land and rice-fields, it was a complicated nuisance. What they needed was a sum of money. Several times Kam had repeated his hope that his eldest child would be able to go to university to become a doctor, though this meant very high fees. He had also repeatedly expressed his desire to buy some land on the edge of town to build a house. Wongso, the most successful, who already owned a house, also often said that he dreamed of buying the house next door to them in order to convert it into a shop. If the family land were sold all of Ma's children would receive their share and would be free to spend that money. It would be more "practical" as Sarpin would say.

Ma was old. Every day she woke a little earlier and went to bed a little later, as if she could make time last longer this way. So that the remaining years could hold more living for her. But her body was frail and tired. Her feet, which she used to be able to invite to go down to the town, treading rocky paths and crossing streams, were now often aching and stiff. She still had a full head of hair which she could still fix without a hairpiece in a bun like a large clenched fist. But it was flecked with white. Each market day she still washed it with a mixture of water and soot from the burnt rice husks and then conditioned it with coconut oil scented with herbs. Once her daughter-in-law from the city had given her some shampoo. It was in a nice yellow-colored bottle. But when her hands touched it Ma did not like the bottle. It was just like the material used to cover the front verandah chairs which Sarpin had bought. And so Ma continued to use the water and soot mixture to wash her hair.

Ma would not live forever. She had felt and experienced much together with the father of her children as well as since he had passed on. She had been through harvests of plenty and those scourged by pests. She had gone through changing times. Not to mention the pain caused by her lifelong male companion's fancy for women and gambling. Yes, Ma had tasted the totality of life, in all its joys and sorrows. She had known the pleasure of holding a wedding ceremony, of marrying off her only daughter after a harvest regarded as extraordinarily abundant in those times. Grandchildren were born, grew up, and received their schooling. Ma could not cope with a sense of ignorance: What was it all for? It was enough education if you could read, write and add up. The village had emptied because as the children grew they moved in droves to the city. No local person who had completed school wanted to remain a farmer, working the land and associating with livestock. They disliked manual labor, getting their hands and feet dirty, with mud or water-buffalo shit. They dreamed of becoming officials, teachers, or police, if not doctors or other positions that required higher education. They wanted office work, with authority and without any further contact with stench or filth. Not one of those who had left the village ever returned to live in the increasingly empty Pudakpayung. There remained only three familes, seven goats, four water-buffaloes, three cows, and several chickens and ducks. Part of the wet rice-fields could still be worked but the dry-fields were left fallow here and there, and the land became barren because no human hand stretched out to tend it. In Pucangayu it was the same. There the scenic beauty had been ruined by the smokestack from the pharmaceutical factory built by the foreigners.

Once more Ma drew a long breath, a breath full of inexpressible regret.

"All you have to do is bless the sale, Mother. *Mas* Dir will arrange everything since the four of us are already in agreement."

Why wasn't Sarpin ashamed to coax her like that in front of outsiders? Family problems should be kept in check, hidden from the gaze of other people. To say that the four of them were all in agreement! To display before the guests just how Ma's children had ganged up to deny her the authority of a mother? The times had certainly taken a giant leap towards Judgement Day. People no longer knew how to restrain themselves, speaking without concern for the way things should be done properly according to family rites. Even the seasons had gone mad, coming with no regularity. Over two hundred baskets of *manggis* fruit had been picked from the garden this year, where last year there were not even fifty. That was because the rains disappeared or came after the flowers had blossomed when they should really have come after the fruit had been picked.

"Before the document of sale is signed there is to be an agreement first, Mother, a contract that the land will be sold to these gentlemen here after the harvest."

Ma turned to look at the broker. The polite manner of his speech irritated her. How much were people like him paid? Did their work simply involve taking people around and helping them make their deals? Suddenly Ma thought, perhaps every time some land is sold he gets a reward, some percentage of the agreed price. He might even make something out of it from both sides: from the seller and the buyer! Ma turned her glance in her son's direction. How much were Sarpin and Dir giving him? Perhaps there had been some bargaining too, because he had said before that the price proposed was the highest ever to be paid by these foreigners. It might be true, it might not. People lie easily enough, especially in doing business!

If they are willing to pay such a high price they must badly need the land. But why does it have to be this land? Ma suspected Dir or Wongso, who had lots of connections and acquaintances in the city. Perhaps one of them initiated this deal. What kind of factory would the plots of eggplant and corn become? Part of the rice-fields will also be taken. Flattened by iron wheels, planted with cement, stones, and bricks. What would grow on top of it?

"Why do they want this land so much, son?"

"As we have explained to your children, Ma'am, these gentlemen want to set up a factory."

"What kind of factory?"

The man did not answer Ma's question but turned to the foreign guests and said something. They conversed for a moment. Then the broker turned back to look at Ma.

"A factory to make food, Ma'am."

"What kind of food?"

The broker shifted in his chair as if his backside was getting tired.

"Dry biscuits or canned food?"

One of the foreign guests said something directed to the broker. Shortly afterward they said to her, "The factory will be a *mi* factory, Ma'am."

"*Mi*?"

"Yes, *mi*, Japanese noodles. Perhaps you have already seen them in the shops at the market. They are called 'Super *Mi*'."

What was that? Ma had never heard of "Super *Mi*" before. She knew that noodles could be cooked in all sorts of ways, in soup or fried. In the *kampungs* there were even special noodle vendors. There they called it *mi kopyok*. But "Super *Mi*"? That was just another strange word which was sure to have come from the city!

"This is the best kind of *mi*, Mother." Sarpin felt it was necessary to interrupt in order to explain. "It tastes very good and what's more it's very practical. It is packaged in individual servings. Just enough for each meal."

Ma rose from her chair.

Everyone followed suit, standing up.

"What do you think, Mother?" Sarpin asked hurriedly. "Do you agree?"

Did Sarpin catch her flash of tiredness and irritation? The voice in which she spoke was definite and resolute. "No!"

And without turning to the others Ma made her way down from the front door. She did not put on the sandals ready at the bottom of the stairs. From beside them she grasped a broad bamboo peasant hat hung on one of the stair posts. She walked outside.

It was burning hot. It would soon be time for the call to the midday prayers from the Pucangayu prayerhouse. The loudspeakers, one more influence from this new style of life, would ruin the tranquillity of this expanse of green. Ma walked to the lip of the paddy-fields in the direction of the valley slope, then continued to the edge of the main road. By the side of a dike she stopped. Let her gaze take in how tranquil and serene it all was. The wind whispered through the rice stalks, heavy with their swollen grains. With the new moon it would be harvest time. For the last time on these fields. Despite her refusal the sale would go through. Ma knew that for sure. Her children had become greedy, for the land had become theirs with their father's death. Only the house and the yard around it remained Ma's by right. Here packets of *mi* would spring up. Super *Mi*, they said. As if the villages, *kampungs* and cities needed a factory to make *mi*! As if the small-scale producers with their little capital could not supply the needs of their country's people!

Ma bowed her head. She rubbed her naked feet in the mud by the edge of the wet reddish dikes of the paddy-field. Mountain soil promising fertility for decades to come. Hazily, through the veil of her tears, she could see the ants and water-insects scuttling off. Seeking refuge? Perhaps they had already heard today's latest news?