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Laksmi Pamuntjak: On being the subject of one's own story*Features - April 01, 2007*

Kadek Krishna Adidharma, Contributor, Singapore

Single parents rarely have spare time, but Laksmi Pamuntjak has produced four literary jewels in the space of two-and-a-half years while keeping up with arts collaborations and freelance work.

The Jakarta Post spent time with this rising star and discovered a petite Venus with mesmerizing, deep-shaded eyes who talks to her cat using the royal "we"; an insomniac driven by a passion for words, a food critic who avoids carbohydrate and deep-fried food like the plague, a self-medicating alcoholic who sups for sustenance -- only mildly (happily) intoxicated with success.

Laksmi sits across a table laden with fresh Vietnamese culinary delights, sipping Shiraz, demure but for the steely conviction of her words.

In the 24 hours before her interview, Laksmi has had a meager one-and-a-half hours of sleep. She was writing until 4 a.m. and woke up at 5:30 a.m. to prepare breakfast of croissant and scrambled eggs for her only daughter, Nadia.

Having taken Nadia to school in time for a cross-country run, she invigorates herself by spending two hours in the gym before visiting the museums of Singapore for which she is designing an Indonesian cultural program.

Ripe with references, Laksmi's writing always warrants a second reading. She attributes her early literary interests to her mother, a social worker and women's movement activist who taught her to read when she was three.

"Growing up with a mother who was devoted to me, who gave up her career, her life, in order to open mine. kindled a voracious appetite for reading.

"My mother and father always prioritized education, travel and books over anything else. We would have little, be sparing in many aspects of our lives, but we would save up."

In 1991, returning from Murdoch University in Perth after four years of Asian Studies, an idealistic Laksmi quickly found her vocation.

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"I knew I had always wanted to write serious pieces. I was dabbling in Vietnam's postsocialist transition. I had a long article that I recrafted into a column. That kick-started my writing commitment to *Tempo*."

Continuing along the same vein she also wrote for *Forum Keadilan* (Justice Forum) and socioeconomic journal *Prisma*; eventually, pregnancy and a difficult childbirth made it impossible for her to continue her career as a political and social commentator.

"I got married early. I had my first daughter. She was unwell. She required 24-hour care. I had no choice but to stay at home and look after her, but I needed to earn.

I wasn't able to observe up close and personal because I couldn't get out as much as I did before I'd got married. I had this commitment (to my family); writing (from home) seemed to be a lot more manageable."

Drawing inspiration from her love of art, music, food, theater and cinema, Laksmi became a contributor to the *Post*, peaking at 15 features a month.

After a brief hiatus in Melbourne while her daughter recovered from traumatic surgery and her husband completed his MBA, she was inspired to embark upon the quest that became her greatest financial success story.

"*The Jakarta Good Food Guide* started as a total experiment. I saw how thriving the food-writing industry was in Melbourne and how influential a food guide could be."

Laksmi had honed her modus operandi as Epicurus, her food critic nom de plume: like a spy she would go clandestine into restaurants, tasting without telling them she was reviewing.

Spending around Rp 100 million of her own over nine months on eating out before sponsorship kicked in, her audacity was rewarded.

Within two-and-a-half months the first print sold out and she went on to sell 10,000 more copies, as well as a subsequent edition.

"There was a demand for it: Jakarta is a fantastic culinary destination."

Living on the cholesterol "fast lane" of marathon dining -- over 600 restaurants for the 2003 edition -- took a toll on her health. Meanwhile, a storm was brewing

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at home: Laksmi and her husband divorced in 2002.

"Something in me was telling me that I needed distance, space; not to be in Jakarta in order to write. Some things needed to come out that couldn't if I'd stayed."

'A refined feminine sensibility'

Laksmi moved to Singapore in 2004: "It was close enough -- I could still afford tangible physical contact with Jakarta; it was not too daunting for my 8-year-old daughter.

"We live in a small apartment, with our cat, Isabella, the most beautiful and playful cat in the land. I didn't seek a grand tall apartment building.

"Our building has four levels -- sixteen units -- with a swimming pool no larger than a fishpond, without night guards. Our neighbors are mostly families with children Nadia's age."

While trying to tame an elusive novel with the working title *Amba*, she worked for a Singapore avant-garde theater that was involved in cross-cultural collaborations.

Taking the hard decision to abandon the novel, she lifted gems from the manuscript and gave it new life as a collection of poems and poetic prose titled *Ellipsis*.

The floodgates opened, and a treatise on man, faith and violence, titled *War, Heaven and Two Women*, quickly followed. Then a collection of sublime short stories, *The Diary of R.S.: Musings on Art*, and a continuation of her poetic impulse, *The Anagram*.

In her writing, Laksmi gives insight to women in their relationships with their children and mother, women with men, voicing angst on the issues of pornography and polygamy.

She questions the cast role of Woman as Temptress: ... *between the tears, the hair, and the ointment, all of which were active and fluent*; she writes of Mary Magdalene ... *somebody fingered her as a sinner and so the Son of God had found it necessary to forgive her*.

To the narrative-driven characters of the Mahabharata mythology, she endows an

inner emotional landscape, such as when the mighty warrior, sworn to celibacy for the kingship of his brother, captures Amba: Bisma cannot explain duty to Amba any more than she can explain to him what it means to be faithful.

How can they when he has just stolen her life and she has made him want?

Author and critic Nukila Amal finds that Laksmi's writing " ... shows the working of a feminine sensibility -- a refined one at that; exploring the Human (Woman) being in her full-spectrum: roles, relations, desires, wounds, memories."

Laksmi does not fully agree. Like all poets, she draws from universal experiences "more various and multifaceted than any generalization, justified or otherwise, would allow.

"I talk a lot about women who have had sad or difficult relationships with men," she concedes, "I'm not for male-bashing. It is more important for me to highlight the vacillation, the lack of definition, the contradictions, the sheer plurality of desire in Woman.

"I believe that in the end both man and woman are responsible for their own choices. The greatest lesson of life, however unconventional, patriarchal, subjugated or unequal a life seems, is to live it the way only you can live it -- you are and should always be the subject."

Silent Prayer for My Daughter on her Ninth Birthday

How is it again, does one begin? The notion itself long fallen into disuse, every beginning a repetition. But it will come, my tiny love, that feeling when something is about to be born, like the dawn of joy, unknown to joy, as when you first catch the glints of a golden city, blue on the blade of a sun-kissed knife; or when you taste your first mature apple, blushing clumsily on its crimson pedicels; or when someone enters you for the first time, moving inside you in a way you think is for keeps, all your windows flying open -- take me, I am your gift -- giddy, glowing, red-hot.

And you will not understand why it feels the same raw, hard way each time, or whether things end in order to begin again, whether there is no such thing as an end, why you are always left alone for a while, in a dark and damp place, sealed from every other feeling but loss, though your body, take it from me, is always made for a new sun.

Laksmi Pamuntjak

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