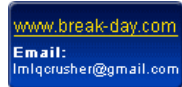


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## Pasar Malam Paris a celebration of RI literary

Kunang Helmi-Picard, , Contributor, , Paris | Sun, 01/04/2009 10:01 AM | Arts & Design

On a crisp December weekend in Paris, the French-Indonesian association, Pasar Malam, held its third bi-annual Indonesian-French literary exchange event.

Featured writers from both countries and held at the Maison des Cultures du Monde and emceed by Arwad Esber, the theme of the weekend was complex: From the private sphere to the public place: autofiction or self-image? Autobiography in literary oeuvre.

Pak Maruli Tua Sagala, from the Indonesian Embassy, officially opened the proceedings and Johanna Lederer, in her written introduction to the program, said that: "...writing about others often leads to unwelcome autobiographical elements, but writing about others without involving a self-centered approach has nourished works by Dickens, Proust, Salman Rushdie and Alexander Soljenitsyne, for example."

French writer and teacher at the prestigious Lycee Louis-le-Grand, Bernard Chambaz, was the first to talk about his work. Chambaz reminded the audience that the great richness of the modern French language is due in part to words or expressions taken from other cultures and languages. Chambaz talked about his own geographical and literary journeys and an extract of his poem, *Le livre blanc de toutes les couleurs*, which touches on the them of French's enrichment by outside influences, was then read by French born Indonesian social scientist Anda Djoehana Wiradikarta.

Makassar-born writer Lily Yulianti Farida, 37, and Luna Widya (trained as an anthropologist) were next, and explained their Makkunrai project, which involved feminist themes. Both had flown from Sulawesi just to attend the literary gathering.

Luna convinced onlookers of her skills as an actress and activist when she later performed at the Restaurant Indonesia's 26th anniversary ten days later. Luna born in Jakarta in 1966 of Makassar parents read two poems and acted out the latter with great bravado. The latter was a long poem about the daughter of someone very unimportant who got caught up in the anti-communist wave in Indonesia and who as a consequence never had the proper papers and left to work as a servant-girl in Saudia Arabia.

She then murdered her employer there. What was unusual was that representatives of the Indonesian Embassy were there as well because additionally a photo exhibition by Patrick Blanche of his Indonesia series was also on display at the restaurant.

Luna, an actress-cum-poet who transforms ideas from short stories and excerpts of novels into recorded theater monologues, explored photo-essays.

Welcome entertainment came in the form of vivacious Mexican dancer Ilse Peralta. Having studied dance with I Made Djimat and Agung Oka Partiniin Bali, Peralta presented a contemporary version of *Keban Tanjung* with such authenticity that she confounded some in the audience, who thought the brunette dancer was Indonesian.

At the following round-table discussion, expertly led by anthropologist Jean-Marc de Grave, philosopher Etienne Naveau began by giving his interpretation of the day's literary theme with references to Sundanese writer Ajip Rosidi. Naveau explained when and why Rosidi chooses to express himself either in Sundanese or in modern Indonesian. He then discussed how, under the guise of writing about others, many writers actually express more about their own point of view and history.

Interpretations and translations of oral traditions is usually required in research on Indonesia and this, Naveau said, can be a major pitfall for young academics, who do not always fathom the peculiarities of local languages, including Bahasa Indonesia.

Naveau cited the difficulties involved in translating a large selection of Sitor Situmorang's poems, edited by Henri Chambert-Loir, in 2002. The compilation, *Paris la Nuit*, was the fruit of cooperation between French and Indonesian students, poets and academics alike, and was overseen by Indonesia's Farida Soemargono-Labrousse, the now retired former lecturer of the National Institute of Languages and Oriental Civilizations (INALCO).

French writer, critic and editor, Christine Jordis, then expounded on her travels in Asia and the "afterwards" - or the insights gained during the trip that enabled her to talk about the *Other*, thereby revealing her own intimate self.

Jordis reminded the audience of deceased Palestinian philosopher Edward Said's idea of the *Other* or the West's exoticization of the East and its need to create differences between the two. Jordis told the audience that she had enjoyed reading Nicolas Bouvier's account of his travels in Indonesia just as much as Chambaz.

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Despite general disappointment at Djenar Maesa Ayu's -- who famously explores female sexuality in her writing -- last minute cancellation, another well-known Indonesian writer, poet and translator, Laksmi Pamuntjak, stepped up to the plate and presented a brilliant paper.

Remarkable for its clarity and precision and adhering to the day's theme in elegant Indonesian prose, Pamuntjak's speech was translated into French by Helene Blanchard, who could barely keep up with the break-neck speed with which it was delivered.

Pamuntjak opened her discourse with a quote from Columbia University's (U.S) John Ashberry, translated into Indonesian: "*Ada saatnya kita sadar bahwa tak ada satupun laku manusia yang lebih dramatis dan meyakinkan ketimbang laku kita sendiri*" (Which approximately re-translated means: There comes a point when we become conscious of the fact that there is no other human behavior that is more dramatic and more convincing than our own).

Her following speech centered around the work of Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Nurhayati Sri Hardini (also known as Nh Dini). Pamuntjak told *The Jakarta Post* afterwards that what was more important to her than her own personal approach to writing was the analysis Ananta Toer and Nh Hardini offer, which reminds the younger generation about a largely ignored period in Indonesian history.

Laksmi focused more on the autobiographical elements in Pramoedya's early stories of Blora, his hometown. She argued that there was "a warmth and intimacy and vulnerability in those Blora stories that distinguish them from most of Pramoedya's prose in which man's thoughts, emotions and actions invariably dominate the store, relegate nature to the sidelines and do away with the abstract."

According to Laksmi, it is clear that Nh Dini includes auto-biographical elements in her writing. Married to a French diplomat, Dini traveled to Japan, the Philippines, Cambodia, America, the Netherlands and France. Recognition finally came with her novels *La Barka* (1973) and *Pada Sebuah Kapal* (1985).

After the discussion, doyen poet Sitor Situmorang read his poem *Lagu Jembatan Kota Paris*, about the bridges spanning the river Seine. He dedicated it to the memory of his close friend, painter and long time resident of Paris, Salim (1908-2008).

An interview of Situmorang by Vincent Bardet, editor at Le Seuil publishing house, was rather awkward for Bardet. Despite the excellent translation by Blanchard, cultural differences came in to play, as Situmorang understands French only passively and is more fluent in Indonesian and Dutch.

Eighty four-year-old Situmorang was reluctant to explain his spirituality and his relationship with women, questions Bardet formulated from reading his poetry.

Later, the audience were invited to view the Parisian premi\*re of *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet!* (They call me monkey), a film based on the novel by Djenar Maesa Ayu. The film touches on themes that have never been directly tackled by a female Indonesian director: life in the Indonesian capital (which could have be any modern Asian metropolis), with its share of trendy young women trying to come to grips with their sexuality and professional life, while resolving problems with their mothers and lovers, including sexual abuse as a child.

As the event drew to a close, the audience was left with much to discuss and cogitate about on the metro ride home in wintery Paris.

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