

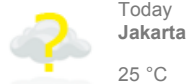


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Fighting fundamentalism with her mighty pen

Belinda Lopez, The Jakarta Post, Jakarta | Sun, 04/27/2008 12:48 PM | People

Laksmi Pamuntjak can tell you exactly where she was on April 22, 2006.

As she tells it, on the day after founding feminist Kartini's birthday, a 6,000-strong carnival of cultures from Aceh, Bali, Java and Papua, of Batak, Betawi, Dayak and Minahasa, met at Monas to face an anti-pornography bill that they felt was trying to hijack the very essence of Indonesia's Pancasila, of its tolerance of difference.

It "smelt like a gas", aimed at women, she says.

Just over two years later, despite witnessing the thousands of students, activists, transvestites, religious figures, feminists, families, artists and ordinary people who marched that day and saw the bill watered down, Laksmi is still worried about the "Islamic hardliners'" agenda.

This weekend she is in Australia to read verse infused with sexuality, and life, and the intermingling of the two. The poetry festival she is attending in the state of Victoria will host an international community of writers, where she is far better known than in Indonesia.

The English language writer has had a poetry career enviable to the often-ignored battalion of poets worldwide. Her first collection of poetry, *Ellipsis* had the "good fortune", as Laksmi puts it, of being placed on *The Herald UK's* top books of the year list in 2005. This from someone who fell into poetry "by default" after she began translating the poems of her creative partner, *Tempo* founder Goenawan Mohamad, into English from their Indonesian original.

Laksmi speaks and writes the English language like someone who has an allegiance to words. In her early 20s she began freelancing for *Tempo* and *The Jakarta Post*, and continues to write about food. Her latest book, *Jakarta Good Food Guide*, was launched last month in Aksara, the bookshop she cofounded in South Jakarta, where she now resides after living in Singapore for two-and-a-half years.

She spoke to the *Post* there on the morning following the "big night", drinking coffee and apologizing for looking so ruffled.

And yet she could easily be mistaken for 10 years younger than her 36 years, petite and beautiful -- and it is this description, if anything, that will ruffle her.

"There's always a tendency to talk about the life of a poet, rather than the work itself. And then it all becomes gossip," she says.

She is frustrated with superficial attitudes toward the work of female artists -- painters, actresses, writers and poets.

"When it comes to women, they always want to know, 'is this about her, is this about the author', which is..." -- she hesitates and looks at the tape recorder, "s**t, because you would hope you've reached an era where women can talk about sexuality".

Laksmi's criticism about such voyeurism extends to -- of all things -- dangdut.

Bandung Mayor Dada Rosada's recent banning of singer Dewi Perssik's "provocative" show, as he described it, saddens her "deeply", she writes later in an follow-up email to the interview. She wants to clarify herself, it is important.

"The fact that people are more interested in following her case as info-tainment news rather than pondering what it means to slide back into an era characterized by censorship on freedom of expression also saddens me," she writes.

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That era, Suharto's era, has demanded her thoughts the last few years, as she nears the completion of her next fiction book, *The Blue Widow*, set on Buru Island in Maluku, where 12,000 alleged communists were detained for a decade under the New Order regime.

The book's plot continues to the present day, where one of her central characters, Srikandi, wrestles with what Laksmi sees as a common personal struggle: "What it means to be "Indonesian" as well as a Muslim today, in a world increasingly divided into Fundamentalism and the rest of us".

But does a little less dangdut dancing and legislation like the new online pornography law really mean Indonesia is reverting back to that time? A pause.

"If the recent increase in Islamist conservatism is allowed to go unchecked... then it does have potential to plunge Indonesia into some kind of retrogressive situation," she says. Local legislation incorporating sharia law and its spirit is "disconcerting".

In her email she will add to this, like an afterthought: "And to think that such values change, what is pornography now may not be pornography tomorrow. Though it is interesting how morality is most often associated with sex, rather than corruption for instance".

"It's cruel because it can go all over the place: it can ban sex magazines, it can, outlaw certain regulations, on polygamy for instance, but it can also prohibit certain works of art and literature. At the same time, how can the values it upholds guarantee the plurality of interpretations inherent in a country like Indonesia?"

Laksmi believes "it would also "curb artists' ability to stretch art to its maximum potential". She admits her own stretch of subject choices in her poetry has avoided the attention she might have attracted had she written them in Indonesian, and not English.

Like much of her writing, her two favorite poems of her own brim with allusions to sex and sensuality. "Silent Prayer for my Daughter on her 9th Birthday" speaks of "the first time", and the woman in "Ellipsis", the title poem of her first poetry book, is pursuing an affair. She is baffled as to why such topics should be taboo.

"It ought to be seen as not something that is only there to underline that *Oh, I'm a woman and I want to be seen as very liberated," she says.

"I don't know of anyone in my generation who talks that way. It's sex. That's what you do. You know, like you go out and get the paper every morning, like you get a coffee". She stops, exasperated.

"I mean, geez."

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