

Goenawan Mohamad  
CONVERSATIONS  
WITH  
DIFFERENCE

Essays from TEMPO magazine

Translated from the Indonesian  
by Jennifer Lindsay

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Conversations with Difference:  
Essays from TEMPO magazine

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## FOREWORD

THIS book consists of essays selected from my writings published between 1968 and 2002. Most of them are translated, thanks to Jennifer Lindsay's hard work and virtuosity, from a five-volume collection of *Catatan Pinggir*, which is the title of my weekly columns for TEMPO news magazine.<sup>1)</sup>

The initial design of *Catatan Pinggir* (literally: notes in the margin) was to give a form to discussions about books and ideas—things that amidst the thrust of Soeharto's development policy were dismissed as a waste of time, a distraction, or even a security risk. For this reason sometimes the columns read like book-reviews; often they bring in quotes from other people's works. This is my way of offering an alternative conversation when book shops survive mainly on school text-books and management manuals, when public libraries are non-existent and the universities let their humanity departments be ruled by fear of censorship and the convenience of clichés.

In my view, the essay, as a form, is the best method to circumvent this utilitarian demand for predictability. The essay, as Adorno puts it nicely, 'starts not with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about...and stops when it feels finished rather than when there is nothing to say.' It has the quality of someone in abstracted mood aimlessly sauntering on the sidewalk. Precisely because it is largely an insubstantial undertaking, it is polemical. It stands against the mania for result and regularity. It makes much of the transient and capricious condemned by the teleology of Five-Year Plans. It takes notes and reflects on things and ideas denied by the ideological illusion of order. Obviously, clichés and fixed ideas are part of the order.

The essay has another role: it gives me the freedom to break away from categories. In the past, many times people asked me, as

TEMPO's Editor in Chief, whether *Catatan Pinggir* was the magazine's editorial wrapped in allusive phrases and allegories to escape the detection of the state censor. I am not sure how to answer this. TEMPO, developing its mode of expression under Soeharto's authoritarian regime, always had problems with censorship. Its policy was to have no editorial putting across the magazine's position on current affairs; partly because it did not want to be trapped into endless negotiations with the common fear of free speech, and partly because it believed that the readers could draw their own conclusions from the news stories presented on its pages. In a time when one could easily follow the prevailing grammar of injustice, lucidity always lay with fewer words. My column is obviously an opinion piece, but it was, and still is, an attempt to forestall such lucidity from turning into an unbreakable crystal of answers; it always sees truth as a process. In that sense, it is not an editorial that normally defines, grasps and analyzes major issues of public interest.

All the same, most of the time I write my column to respond to a specific incident or to comment on a particular political climate, and I address it to my contemporaries; I cannot therefore give *Catatan Pinggir* the weight of timelessness. In this sense, it is a journalistic piece of writing. But I am aware that its use of language and allegories disturbs journalistic linearity. Though it was not my intention to create an odd piece, the Indonesian context gave me but limited choice. Against the acronym-studded columns of bureaucratese that made New Order Indonesian, I had to have recourse to the realm of images or to poetry and its ambiguities.

This is also my way to dismiss my own pretense that things are always clear and distinct—a pretense which leads an editor, or a public intellectual for that matter, to believe that he or she has discovered the straight path to the ultimate. For what it's worth, my short, discontinuous thought pieces underline the meaning of 'essay' as Montaigne, who invented the form, first used it. Describing himself as *divers et ondoyant*, 'diverse and wavering,' the first essayist chose as one of his mottos these famous words: 'I

determine nothing. I do not comprehend things. I suspend judgment; I examine.'

Goenawan Mohamad

<sup>\*)</sup> Other sources are *Harian Kami*, before the daily was banned by the government in 1974, *Suara Independen*, an underground newspaper published after the banning of TEMPO in 1994; and *D&R*, a weekly run by former TEMPO journalists before TEMPO could get published again in 1998.

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## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

How often one hears the comment that Indonesian (or worse, *Bahasa*) is an 'easy language.' A phrase so often uttered at cocktail parties by diplomats a year or two into the job, by tourists pleasantly surprised that they can get by with a few phrases, by foreigners who have lived in Indonesia for years, but also often by Indonesians themselves, perhaps used to hearing this comment from foreigners. I can't count the number of times I have heard people say that Indonesian is easy because 'it has no verb tenses,' as if this is a measurement of linguistic complexity, as if Indonesian itself doesn't have other subtle ways of expressing nuances of time, and as if Indonesian doesn't have its own fascinating (and frustrating) areas of complexity, to which those wearing other linguistic spectacles, European for instance, take years to become sensitised.

Yet, if the language is so 'easy,' why is it that so few foreigners can write it? Why are there so few who can master this? Even those who have studied the language for years, myself included, cannot write well in Indonesian, and avoid it, unlike foreign scholars of, say, French, English or German who early in their careers also write in the language they study. And few Indonesians themselves really exploit the complexities of the language in good writing. Goenawan Mohamad is one of the few.

Anyone who translates from Indonesian knows how difficult it is to grasp the intricacies and nuances of the language, let alone convey them in another language. Goenawan's skilful manipulation of the Indonesian language makes its translation a constant process of discovery. He has a poet's sense of language. He constantly extends vocabulary, plays with sound, experiments with rhythm, balance and punctuation, and masterfully wields Indonesian's potential for moving between obscurity and clarity, generalisation and specificity, distance and proximity.

In his essays, Goenawan extends Indonesian vocabulary consistently, through maximising use of synonyms, through introducing new words from other languages (especially Malay and Javanese) and through airing words rarely used in Indonesian. One technique of familiarising the reader with new (or new old) words is to use and repeat synonyms within a text. His juxtaposition of synonyms, often as rhythmically balanced phrases, also reminds readers of Indonesian words for vocabulary Indonesian-ised from English, (*penjelajahan* beside *explorasi*, *konsolidasi* with *kesatupaduan*, *konsensus* and *mufakat*; *kian kompleks bersamaan*, *kian rumit pula...*). He plays with Indonesian's complex system of pronouns, moving between intimacy, inclusiveness and distance, for instance using the Indonesian first person plural pronouns *kita* and *kami*, sometimes facing this directly through discussing in the text the significance of the inclusiveness of *kita*—the *us-ness* of *us*. At other times he introduces the word *Tuan* for *you* (as the more distanced 'you, dear reader'), or uses *kami* at one moment as a more intimate 'I' and at another as the more distant 'one.' As translator, all this is a constant challenge and fascination.

Finding resonant vocabulary is always difficult in translation. In translating the essays, I have tried to give a sense of Goenawan's language use, where possible, through using synonyms in English where Goenawan uses them in Indonesian, thus not repeating a word if he does not repeat it. There are also certain Indonesian words I find difficult to translate. The words *bangsa*, *negeri*, *negara*, *tanah air*, namely words around concepts of state/nation/country/land of one's birth, are as tricky as those concepts themselves, and Goenawan himself shifts in his usage of them. The word *kuasa* (power, control) and its derivatives are extremely shifty as they take over meaning when being moved from one language to another. *Korban*, a word that can mean both victim and sacrifice, is difficult to capture in English (hence the title of the essay *The Sacrificed*). Words like *rantau*, which expresses the sense of being away from home, the sense of home when one is away, and the wandering that brings this about, are excruciating. There are many more.

Goenawan's concern for balance, rhythm and alliteration is

evident in all his essays. In translating, where the effect of alliteration or the rhythm of the words is strong in its effect in the Indonesian, I have prioritised this in the translation. (*Dan di bayangan kita pun tampak Mussolini di atas sebuah balkon di Kota Roma: gundul, gempal, bagaikan sebuah lingga yoni, dan gemuruh* And in our imagination Mussolini appears on a balcony in Rome: bald and brawny, like a lingga-yoni, and bellowing. [Menopause]) If possible, when the words are balanced equally with their number of syllables in the Indonesian, I have tried to find the same balance in English (destiny is an inevitability, strong and straight (*tajam dan tegar*) like a javelin. [Mr President].) If nothing works, I try to replace one effect with another (repetition, for instance), just to draw attention to the language play.

One aspect of Goenawan's concern for rhythm, is his rather idiosyncratic use of punctuation. He likes long sentences, broken up with colons, semicolons and dashes—a lot of talking in parentheses. On the whole, I do not try to change this, for it is as unusual in the Indonesian as it is in English. For example, an essay that does not appear in this volume, but was widely circulated at the time of the September 11 attack (translation published in *Masthead* and in the Lontar publication, *Manhattan Sonnet*) was titled *Suatu Hari, di New York*. My translation (One Day, in New York), retained that comma, which marked off the difference between the general (One Day—it could be just like any other day) and the specific (in New York—i.e. that terrible day). I believe that if the balance of a sentence feels unusual in Indonesian, then it should feel unusual in English. It is not my role as translator to make everything sound familiar and easy, nor am I trying to 'polish' the Indonesian. Goenawan once commented to me after reading one of my weekly translations for TEMPO that 'it was better than the original.' I told him that if this were so, I felt I had failed as translator. Similarly, if the Indonesian also at times feels vague or contrived, my translation does not attempt to find a remedy.

A brief comment on verb tense and time, seeing as this is so often referred to when Indonesian is accused as 'simple.' In translating Indonesian into English, I find this one of the most

difficult areas, not because there is less sense of 'time' in Indonesian, but rather because its ability to hold shifting nuances of time at once, which in translation into English has to be homogenised, usually into the narrative past. To be true to this effect, one would at times have to render the translation fluctuating between present and past tenses, which makes the English virtually unreadable. Here, translation narrows and forces conformity. I sense Indonesian's potential for movement between coexisting past and present as related to its movement between proximity and distance. For example, when writing a letter in Indonesian, one imagines oneself to be with the person written to (I hope the weather *here* is fine). The sense of 'here' and 'there' becomes mixed, fluid, exchangeable. So too a mixing of 'here' and 'there' can occur in a shifting sense of time. Goenawan's essay *Letter to Bung Hatta* is an example of this, where he literally addresses someone long dead as though present, 'here,' yet of the past. The entire essay could also have been translated shifting between past and present.

Thematically, in the essays, Goenawan writes about difference: the difficulties of managing difference in politics; the failures of accepting difference which leads to conflict and violence; the richness of texts as sources of difference in reading and interpretation; and the paradox and irony of difference itself, namely the need to maintain the freedom to differ from difference. But he is just as concerned with difference in language, with differences between words, small differences in meaning and sound, the joy of language difference. This is why he is such fun to translate—for this is the realm of joy of the translator. The opening essay of this book (*Differing*, the Indonesian title is *Beda*) is a fine example of his manipulation of difference both thematically and linguistically. In this essay he plays with the word *beda*. He uses the synonyms *berlain-lain*, *yang beraneka*, and then uses; *berbeda* as 'differing' or 'to differ' as in *berbeda adalah hak manusia*, *berbeda* as 'being different' as in *karena ia berbeda*; *pembedaan* as differentiation; and *perbedaan* as difference. And having teased the reader with this play, (and introduced the Indonesian *mengusik* for 'to tease,') he goes on to talk about the word *beda* in Javanese as having two meanings, to be

different, but also 'to tease'; 'a teasing that is playful and enjoyable'. In other words, something that has no final purpose of having a final 'product'. It has no 'teleology'.

All this experimentation with the Indonesian language comes at a time when Indonesian—particularly in the media—is being increasingly impoverished by the lazy use of English, or Indonesianised English. This is considered trendy. Indonesian, and Malay and regional language root words are not smart. And Goenawan's enriching of the written language comes at a time when the miracle of Indonesian's transformation into truly a first language, or at least co-first language, is so strikingly evident for most of the population. This means above all the transformation of Indonesian into a real oral rather than written language, and this has been happening over the past thirty years, particularly over the past twenty with the invasion of television bringing Indonesian speech, and predominantly Jakartan colloquial speech, into farflung homes. One effect of all this is that written Indonesian, particularly in the media, is becoming more 'oral,' more colloquial. People write more and more in short, clipped, dialogue-type phrases. There is not as much interest in creating written prose that reads as written prose. There are not many people writing long, complex, balanced sentences.

A text is merely a source of created meanings, as Goenawan consistently points out. One translates in reading the original. The translator does the same one step further, and provides a new text for meanings. When all is said and done, this is itself a conversation of difference, between two people with their different languages. A translator translates into her own language, which is created by her own experience. My English language was formed by my background and experience; my family, my environment, the country where I grew up, the religion in which I heard texts, my schooling, my reading, my travel. And my language continues to be shaped by new things. This is utterly personal. There are flashes in the translation process when some tiny aspect of experience is sensed to coincide with the writer's (common reading; common enjoyment; a shared idea; a particular phrase, or a similar fascination for something). I

had a flash of recognition and joy with *beda*, for example. But in the end, other translators will have different backgrounds and different connections to the text, and will always translate differently. Thank heavens for that.

Jennifer Lindsay

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## NOTE ON SOURCES

THE essays in this book are translations of Goenawan Mohamad's weekly column—*Catatan Pinggir*, literally notes in the margin, in English titled *Sidelines*—that appears in the Indonesian journal TEMPO which he founded in 1971. In 2000, TEMPO began publishing an English language edition of this journal. The majority of the translations appearing here were published in this English language TEMPO over 2000-2002. All have been re-edited by the translator and where the original Indonesian texts have been revised (often after publication) the translations have likewise been revised. Readers reading the English translations against the published Indonesian originals may notice these occasional discrepancies.

Some older essays have also been translated for this volume. Most are from TEMPO, other than those published during the time that TEMPO was banned (June 1994 - October 1998) and which appeared in the magazines *D&R (Detektif & Romantika)* and *Suara Independen*. One essay, published in *Harian Kami*, from 1968, predates TEMPO.

The Indonesian texts of Goenawan's essays are also published in book form in Indonesia. The publisher Pustaka Utama Grafiti (Jakarta) has published five volumes to date: *Catatan Pinggir 1* (1982); *Catatan Pinggir 2* (1989); *Catatan Pinggir 3*, (1991); *Catatan Pinggir 4* (1995); *Catatan Pinggir 5* (2001). In 2001 TEMPO published a hardback anthology of Goenawan's essays from 1960-2001, titled *Kata, Waktu. Esai-esai Goenawan Mohamad 1960-2001* [Jakarta: Pusat Data & Analisa TEMPO, 2001].

In this book, reference to the Indonesian text of each essay is given at the foot of the translations, with its Indonesian title and citation of its publication in magazine and book form. If the Indonesian title has been altered, this is noted. In some cases, the title was already changed in the Indonesian when the essay



reappeared in book form. In other cases, Goenawan changed the title for this book, occasionally because there was more than one essay with the same title, but also to sharpen the focus in keeping with the presentation here.

The references at the foot of the essays are as follows: (e.g. for essay *Al-Identity*)

*Al-Identitas*. *D&R*, 10 March 1997. [magazine D&R]

K.W.: 1159-1162 [*Kata, Waktu* reference]

C.P. V: 193-198 [*Catatan Pinggir* volume 5, *Grafiti* book]

A collection of Jennifer Lindsay's translations of Goenawan's essays was published in 1994 by Hyland House Publishing Pty Ltd, Melbourne Australia under the title *Sidelines: Writings from Tempo*, and republished in 1994 by The Lontar Foundation, Jakarta, Indonesia, under the title *Sidelines: Thought Pieces from TEMPO magazine*. Her translations of six of Goenawan's essays written around the time of the September 11 terrorist attack in New York were published in *Manhattan Sonnet: Indonesian Poems, Short Stories, and Essays about New York* published by The Lontar Foundation, Jakarta, in 2001. A few translations appearing in this current book also appeared in those earlier publications.

The selection of essays appearing in this book was made by Goenawan Mohamad and Jennifer Lindsay.

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*Goenawan Mohamad & Jennifer Lindsay*